

# Diversity at Mason

## *Student Reflections*

*Edited by*

David W. Haines

Samuel Brase

Alejandra Gonzalez-Arias

Celine Kemp

Tiffany Newsome

Razia Tajuddin



A GEORGE MASON PUBLICATION ON DIVERSITY  
FROM THE DIVERSITY RESEARCH GROUP AND THE OFFICES OF UNIVERSITY LIFE



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## FOREWORD

THE DIVERSITY RESEARCH GROUP consists of about twenty administrators, staff, and faculty who have been meeting once a semester for the last three years. It includes participants from the Office of Equity and Diversity Services, Institutional Assessment, Institutional Research, a variety of offices in University Life, the Writing Center, and faculty from Anthropology, Education, English, Public and International Affairs, and Sociology. The group has come together not out of any formal directive but from a shared interest in the topic.

And the topic? Each meeting begins with the same reminder: George Mason is a highly diverse institution, and it is diverse in unusual ways. It is also marked by remarkable levels of collaboration across instructional, student affairs, and institutional support sectors. What better location from which to consider the impact of diversity on higher education? Over the last three years, members of the group have taken some new approaches to the institution's data, conducted focus group sessions with students, offered panels at professional meetings, investigated the prospects of collaborative research with other Virginia universities, shared information with one another, and—thanks to support from the Offices of University Life—embarked on three pilot projects. This publication offers the results of one of these: student papers on the topic of diversity solicited by anthropology professor David Haines.

There are many interesting aspects to these papers, one of which is the degree to which students believe that Mason is one of the most diverse institutions in the country, most likely because the *Princeton Review*, drawing on its survey of student opinions, has claimed that on our behalf. Of course, we are diverse—almost 40 percent of entering freshmen have at least one foreign-born parent, almost 20 percent of freshmen are themselves foreign born, a third of our students are students-of-color, 20 percent are first-generation college, 7 percent are Muslim—but still, we are likely not that diverse, at least compared to other universities on the East or West coasts. Thus, it is hard not to be struck by how important this “diversity ranking” is for many students.

So, diversity must mean something for us here. Thanks to David Haines and the student editors of this volume, Samuel Brase, Alejandra Gonzalez-Arias, Celine Kemp, Tiffiany Newsome, and Razia Tajuddin, this collection of undergraduate student papers explores what that “something” might be. I hope you find it interesting.

Karen E. Rosenblum  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Convener, the Diversity Research Group



## PREFACE

THE ESSAYS IN THIS VOLUME represent an effort to obtain the involvement of students as analysts of diversity rather than only as subjects of diversity research. The essays are the result of one of several pilot efforts undertaken by George Mason's Diversity Research Group over the past year to assess the dimensions and potentialities of diversity at our university. This particular pilot effort resulted in sixteen five-page essays by selected undergraduate students—a set of students of considerable range in age and personal background. The topic was very broadly defined, with the single limitation that it should relate to diversity at Mason. Students could thus pursue any aspect of diversity in any context and from any perspective. Like the other pilot efforts, the emphasis was on students as individuals, as cognitive agents, and as well-grounded authorities on contemporary campus diversity—indeed often better grounded than we (whether administration, faculty, or staff) are likely to be.

The format that students chose was generally a fairly conceptual, free-form essay, although some students did more research-oriented approaches (for example, asking other students what they thought about diversity). Looking at the essays overall, some common observations by students and themes in their writing are apparent. For example, there is a ready acceptance of the reality of Mason's diversity—that there is indeed exposure to a wide range of diversity, that there is relatively amicable co-existence, and that the diversity exists without the predominance of any individual group or any particular dimension of diversity. There is also a clear sense of both the potential and limitations of diversity as it exists at Mason—perhaps most especially a recognition that the co-existence of rather different kinds of people is also accompanied by frequent mutual segregation. Another common theme is a sensitivity to the problems in defining diversity coupled with a sense that a very broad range of vectors ought to be considered when discussing diversity: race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, class, language, age, disability, other group-making dynamics (e.g., Greeks), and personal opinion. Finally, the essays collectively suggest a general sense that different kinds of diversity exist along continua of importance, visibility, and acceptability.

In these essays, different students emphasize different aspects of diversity and develop various frameworks for understanding the topic. Three particularly interesting lines of analysis are worth noting. The first involves the institutionalization of diversity. At Mason, the emphasis on diversity is both a response to the university's situation and an active marketing and recruitment strategy. In particular, the university emphasizes the way in which its own diversity mirrors—or is a bridge to—a more globalized world. While this might suggest a certain superficiality to diversity at Mason, the net result is still that students have exposure to a very broad range of diversity, leaving them with significant possibilities for expanding their identity and interactions. One implication is that considerable skepticism is needed when considering diversity at Mason—and presumably at other universities as well. However, several of the student analysts also suggest that the machinery of marketing diversity does not necessarily diminish the reality or potential of that diversity.

A second line of analysis is more ecological in nature. Diversity, it appears, can only be understood in its actual physical and temporal contexts. For example, Tuesdays and Thursdays are effectively more “diverse” days on campus, and certainly the events of International Week provide a more diverse time on the annual schedule. Diversity also exists and is bridged in distinct physical contexts. The Johnson Center (Mason's still-new student union that makes an appearance in many of these essays) provides an exceptionally good environment both for coexistence among diverse groups and for their segregation. More generally, classroom, organizational, and work spaces provide occasions for greater interaction across diversity. The implication here is that diversity needs to be mapped into place and time.

A final line of analysis involves how different kinds of diversity have distinctive dynamics and implications. Age, for example, may have the most pervasive (and positive) implications in the classroom itself. Nationality can be crucial (and also very positive) in classroom discussions of international relations. Other kinds of diversity may be more problematic in their consequences—for example, there are sharp problems posed by language (even by accents) and potentially by religion. As well, some aspects of diversity (such as class) are often effectively hidden or (like disability) seem to be outside the usual range of across-diversity interaction. Diversity is thus a complex field of varying similarities and differences that cannot be reduced to individual

categories. It is also a field that is constantly changing. Neither diversity nor the categories of diversity are stable. One implication is that static research models based on pre-defined categories are exceedingly questionable for this topic.

The essays that follow are organized into three general topics. Part I has a series of essays that examine diversity overall at Mason—including the widely cited *Princeton Review* rating of that diversity. Part II focuses more on the personal experiences of the essayists. Those essays underscore the advantages that Mason provides to many students in its diversity, but they also explore the limitations and occasional disappointments that students experience in bridging differences. Finally, Part III raises more conceptual questions about the different ways that the notion of diversity is used, perhaps most crucially in how an emphasis on diversity can serve both to mediate across social divides but also sometimes to publicize and harden those divides. In all, these essays provide an instructive sampler of how some students at a particularly diverse U.S. university are navigating a diversity that is neither static nor unitary, but rather constantly evolving along multiple dimensions. These essays suggest they are finding that process rewarding and frustrating, discouraging and hopeful.

\* \* \* \* \*

I would like to express appreciation to Sandy Hubler of University Life for her support of this project, to the other members of the Diversity Research Group for providing an open forum for discussion and inquiry, and to my co-editors who produced fine work on unbelievably short notice. You can see what they thought about the process in the Afterword. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Mason's student newspaper, the *Broadside*, for its active interest in diversity issues, including the publication (on February 26, 2006) of an early version of Robin Chen Delos's opening essay.

David W. Haines  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology





# I

## DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY

Robin Chen Delos

### MASON AS A MICROCOSM

#### *Are we truly diverse?*

THE PRINCETON REVIEW named George Mason University the most diverse college campus in the nation. A walk through the Johnson Center on any weekday would prove the *Review* correct, as students talk and joke with their friends in a multitude of different languages. But what does this diversity actually mean?

Kaila Bradley, an African American and junior majoring in the administration of justice, said she thinks Mason is diverse, especially compared to her hometown in South Carolina, where “the only people I ever see are black and white.” But she noticed that different groups do not interact. “Similar people are always together, speaking their language, not really blending... I think there should be more interaction, but I guess people are just comfortable with what they know, comfortable with people who are like them.” When asked who her friends are, she said, “They’re all black.”

Kathy Shinal is a European American and senior working on a bachelor of individualized studies degree. She does not see much true diversity at Mason because for true diversity to exist, “you have to have interaction between different cultures, races, genders, age groups... People have to be learning from one another and accepting one another,” Shinal said.

T. Do is a sophomore international student and business administration major from Vietnam. Most of his friends are other international students from more than twenty different countries. Like Shinal and Bradley, he noticed the separation between different groups of people at Mason. “But for us, for international students, we are involved together to learn new things... The reason we come here is because we want to learn new cultures, and especially to learn English.” He

said he makes a conscious effort to meet people from all different backgrounds.

### ***We're all students, right?***

KENJI BOHALL, another bachelor of individualized studies student, has been in college for ten years but came to Mason just last semester. He is half Japanese, half Anglo and was raised in an ethnically diverse Springfield, Virginia neighborhood where connections to the military allowed for a sense of commonality. Bohall believes a shared background makes people more comfortable around each other. He said he thinks the military was enough of a shared background for the Indian, Pakistani, Afghan, Iraqi, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, African American, and Caucasian families in his neighborhood to all interact with each other. At Mason, that one common unifying factor is student identity. But Bohall said he doesn't think that is enough. "Being a student is not right now a very comfortable background for a lot of people. It's not a very strong background because it's not old enough, it's not built up enough where everyone shares a certain ideology of how to be a student."

### ***Who will make the first move?***

IT IS A STRUGGLE for many Mason students to open up to others outside their background. Shinal suggested that it's up to "a curious individual to make their own choices to expand their knowledge and their beliefs." But Bradley said that it is up to the non-Americans to approach her, not the other way around. She shared an apartment with an African student for a year but never got to know her. Bradley said the roommate just spoke her native language with her own friends and ate her native country's food. "I wouldn't go to someone else's country and not try to speak their language or not eat their food or not try and get to know the people who live there," said Bradley. "I think it's natural, but at the same time, I think it's kind of rude." When Bradley was asked if she approached her housemate, she answered, "Why should I—I'm in my country. If you come to my country but only speak your language and eat your food, it's disrespectful. I don't want to talk to you."

Iraqi American Marwa Alkhairo, a senior and international relations major, has a different perspective. She believes she can be herself at Mason. She pulls out a pendant from under her shirt: "Here I always



wear this necklace. I'm proud of it." The necklace is shaped like Iraq, with the country's green stars and red, white and black stripes painted on it. When many people immigrated to America, she said, they "had to hide who they were because of fear of governmental policies or not being accepted ...and here at Mason, you walk around and hear different languages, and that's great...because that's the world." She added that if students don't segregate themselves, they have an opportunity to learn about many cultures. At Mason "you're just so naturally exposed to all these different countries all at once and that in itself is very powerful...if you're open to it."

Samuel Brase

## VIEWS OF DIVERSITY

DIVERSITY AT MASON comes in many forms. I've befriended Persian people, men and women well into their fifties, people from poor or rich backgrounds, Virginians and those who have never before been to the East Coast. A startling array of international students and people of rich ethnic backgrounds come to Mason for higher learning. While it paints an extremely positive image to the external world, the internal view is rarely discussed. Mason has become a thriving microcosm, an example to the world of how to live among those who have not only had different experiences but also hold differing world views. Everyone who attends Mason leaves, it seems, with a very positive view of both the school and the world. Furthermore, we are reassured that we are all part of humanity and are seeking our own happiness.

People share classes that call on them to study not only their similarities but their differences as well. In Sociology 300, Professor Victoria Rader has the students proudly claim various aspects of their selves: their sexuality, their politics, and their nationality. As long as you engage in friendly discussion, it is vital to hold onto your sense of self. In a world where technology has closed the gap between peoples, sometimes it is easy to lose one's identity. By remembering where we came from, we can better understand how we fit into the world and where we are going. At Mason, we do not learn to taunt others because

of differences; instead we learn to celebrate our own uniqueness. As students continue their educational careers at Mason, they run into countless people proud of their backgrounds. There are women openly discussing their bisexuality and students unafraid to defend Palestinian views.

This uniqueness and pride leads to individual world views; people are loud and opinionated at Mason, and argue heartily to defend their positions. Yet the flip side of these arguments is that just as often, we understand and accept a differing view and have grown as a result. An intrinsic part of the Mason experience is meeting new and different people and exchanging ideas with them. Many universities don't benefit from such a diverse student population, which simply reinforces traditional views of those different from us—whoever that “us” may be. Mason lets you experience other cultures and allow them into your own, while discussing as many deep and learned topics as can be imagined. It creates an extremely invigorating learning environment; not only do students explore ideas from their own history, but they are exposed to different historical and cultural perspectives.

People from places with their own rich histories bring their experience to the table as well. Not only do they share ideas about their homelands, but they bring first-hand experience of those lands. I met a student once who went by the name of Fox Salehi. He was a Persian with a British accent who had traveled extensively in Europe. We shared a fiction writing workshop together, and his stories often brought a certain level of personal experience to the table. One was a love story that spanned from Amsterdam to Rome, and he spoke with such authority on each town that you felt he had not only visited these places, but that he had lived there. Fox spoke of various European customs that felt alien to me but expanded my knowledge of Europe, something you can't normally learn in a college class. There is no introductory course on contemporary European customs; you learn about them from experience. It is thanks to Mason's strong writing program and diverse student body that I have met such outstanding characters as Fox.

George Mason doesn't just foster ethnic diversity; there is also much social diversity as well. In the Sociology 300 class I took, there were jocks next to geeks, lesbians next to frat boys. So many of the environments that are created in these classrooms offer an incredibly diverse sampling of students and allow you to interact with students

you would not have normally interacted with. Geeks generally don't talk to jocks, but this class set a positive background for the kind of interplay that can lead to understanding and acceptance. Some honors classes, which may have had less diversity, nevertheless had diverse material; the books focused on everything from Hindu mythology to Chinese communist history.

Strangely, there have been few negative effects regarding this expansive diversity at Mason. This is partly thanks to orientation, when students are introduced to the plethora of people who attend the school. Yet perhaps a theory can be drawn from the Mason environment. By having all types of people, from all walks of life, living and working in the same area, differences are overshadowed because no one group is a majority. It reminds me of the atmosphere you find in cities like New York City, Chicago, or San Francisco. This cultivated, modern atmosphere provides the feel of a globalized nation and world, where distinct cultures interact and work together. Mason is a microcosm, a small city within the rural county of Fairfax, that provides that same atmosphere.

Yet one wonders what exactly is implied by the message of "incredible diversity" Mason has been constantly broadcasting, and what effects it has on the perceptions of students. How much do we actually notice the diversity on the campus? Obviously, the answer to this will vary among individuals. Also, you get used to it quickly, and so it all eventually blends together. For freshman or new transfer students who are coming from less diverse areas, it may be somewhat of a shock to see the wide array of nations represented, but it's something you get used to. You can't thrive on this campus without accepting other cultures; it just is not possible. Everyday you see different people, whether they are of different religions or different worldviews, and the only way to function happily and without complaint is to understand them as your equals. The intense exposure to a rich variety of people affords no time to find them strange or alien. Indeed, as you interact with everyone on a daily basis, you quickly understand who they are and where they come from, so much so that you cannot help but find their uniqueness as something to be cherished.

There's always the risk that, as cultures interact, some will get submerged under others. The more relevant and dominant cultures will inevitably rise above the others and we will risk losing those others as a result. That's why it's important that the school help create

various programs and events to support all kinds of cultures. There was an event last year to celebrate a Hindu holiday which involved painting bright colors on clothes and then dancing to music. Campus activities like these demonstrate that not only is Mason diverse, but it actively encourages the diversity to thrive. The faculty also encourage an atmosphere of respect and interest, where all are welcome to participate and explore new and exciting cultures.

Mason's diversity is, as we all well know, one of the university's highest selling points. We strive to be acknowledged for our diversity, and it shows. The *Princeton Review* has us in first place when it comes to "Diverse Student Population," and Mason is not afraid to let that recognition be known. The experience on campus is one that has to be felt before it can truly be understood. An essay with a few glowing words about how one student finds the background of the school to be engaging and rich in diversity is hardly a substitute for spending a day on the campus. Diversity at Mason is remarkable and something truly to be prized, if not for its signification as the most diverse campus in the United States, then for its forethought in perceiving global trends toward multiculturalism and globalization and their effects on college life.

Tiffany Newsome

## A WORLD OF DIFFERENCES

THERE ARE MANY different types of diversity. Diversity, for example, could mean a variety of ethnicities or cultures. Diversity has a number of possible effects on people and cultures. For example, I grew up in an environment with people from different cultures and ethnicities and my background has had such an impact on me that I am not comfortable in an environment where the people are mainly of one ethnic group. For me, Mason's diverse population was a deciding factor in choosing to attend the school. Diversity is also one of the main factors that shape the school's culture.

One of Mason's strong points is the wide variety of people who attend the university. One of the obvious characteristics of Mason's diversity is that the school has a large number of people from differ-

ent cultural backgrounds. For example, some schools give an impression of a single type of people who attend the college. I cannot think of George Mason as a school that is characterized by mainly one group of people. There are significant numbers of people from various different ethnic, sexual, religious, political, and age groups who attend this school. On this campus, I have seen a large number of international students from Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. There are also large groups of Caucasians, African Americans, Asian Americans, Middle Easterners, and Hispanics who call the United States “home.” There are also a significant number of Democrats, Republicans, Third Party members, even Anarchists. The Pride Alliance (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender) has a healthy and active membership, as do conservative groups like the Campus Crusade.

There is, however, a paradox in Mason’s diversity on an intellectual level. During my time in this school, there has been uniformity in intellectual ideas. In class discussions, there are rarely any extremely divergent viewpoints expressed. The students mainly express similar view points repeatedly. This has been fairly consistent during my four years of attending this school. I am a senior, and since I was a freshman, I have participated in many class discussions that sounded extremely similar. Whether the questions were about diversity, the importance of certain events on history, or groups of people, the questions and answers were often the same.

For example, when I was a freshman, a major section of my 100 level history class was focused on what it means for a historian to be objective. Many students asked such questions as whether it was possible for humans to be objective. In my 300 level courses, students asked the same type of question during discussions. Granted, many of these students probably did not take the same course; however, these issues are discussed in many history courses and at different levels. There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. It could mean that there is not much diversity in the intellectual communities from which the students come. It could also mean that people are not comfortable with discussing views outside of the norm of a classroom setting. Or this could be a by-product of the educational system, since the education system is based on standardizing the way people think and work. However, this phenomenon is not caused by a lack of openness to different ideas in classrooms. During discus-

sions where different viewpoints are expressed, the peers and teachers respond to the student positively. There have been people in a number of my classes who have had ideas that went against the norm, and usually everyone involved responded with openness and maturity. Both parties were encouraged to talk about their arguments and these usually led to interesting, passionate, and civilized discussions.

One of the characteristics of the diverse population at George Mason is that there is a peaceful coexistence between the various groups. The people and the administration in this school have an interesting response to the diversity. There might be some isolated incidents between people with diverging views; however, there is not a strain in the relationships between these various groups. I find comfort in the fact that it is very common for me to walk into the Johnson Center and see a kiosk for the Campus Crusade, the Palestinian group's kiosk next to a Jewish group's kiosk, with campaigners for a third party candidate outside the Johnson Center, all coexisting peacefully. For example, when I have been in other diverse environments, people usually stick to their own groups. During lunch time, for example, there may be an Asian table, a Caucasian table, etc. Self-segregation exists in Mason as well; however, it does not exist to the extremes that I have seen in other places. Everyday, during lunchtime, the various groups of people are intermixed and interacting with each other.

One of George Mason University's main characteristics is that it is diverse. This diversity has created a tolerant and fluid environment that is perfect for discourse and learning. The school is diverse in having a wide variety of ethnicities, cultures, people with different sexual orientations, and backgrounds. The most important characteristic of Mason, however, is that these communities not only peacefully coexist, but they interact and come together to form a solid community.

Thomas Cooke

## DIVERSITY: A FACT OF LIFE

**D**IFFERENCES, AS THEY TEACH in elementary school, do not make things better or worse ... just different. I believe the same holds true in all cases in which things may be considered different. I do

admit, if you look at a single aspect when comparing two things you will be able to judge which is better, but on a grander scale everything has its own set of advantages and disadvantages so nothing can really be thought of as better. Take languages for example, there is no way to say whether French or German is better (unless you're biased). Both are languages and serve their purpose, and so no matter what you're comparing, no one thing is truly better than another in every way.

With the idea that no one thing can be better than another, we can now look into the issue of diversity. Simply put, diversity is nothing more than differences among a group. There are many ways to be diverse but the most common way to view diversity, when referring to the human species, is by differentiation based upon race or ethnicity. Every ethnic group is different. If they were the same, then they would simply be the same. Each has their own set of values, traditions, customs, ceremonies, and so forth. These differences can become a serious problem if they exist in an intolerant society, such as the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. Under the right conditions, however, these differences can cause a golden age for a civilization.

Differences can be a very effective instructional tool. Having a teacher, or even a student, from another culture can have positive effects on everyone involved. Assuming that there are no problems with communication, which is occasionally an issue, every person involved brings something different to the collective. Through asking and answering questions, teaching, and learning, these differences begin to reinforce and support each other. If, for example, one student is very effective at asking questions, all students learn from the answers even if they are too shy to ask themselves. Thus, simply being involved with others who are different can make you a more tolerant, smarter, and all around better person.

Events such as cultural exhibitions and parties can also help to bridge the gap and create a common goal. Being able to see how others are different not only gives the viewer the ability to see something new, and possibly quite exciting, but it also gives them a chance to see how they are similar, in interests or other ways. Noticing similarities is the best way to bridge any gap and help bring about a better global understanding of the way the world is, how it works, and how it can be improved.

Unfortunately, these types of events can also reinforce the differences between two people and push them further apart. In the wrong

environment, with people who are not open to new things, celebrating diversity can do just the opposite of what is intended. By holding events unique to certain groups, many people may feel left out, or even that they are not as important as the group. These cultural events are often used to celebrate traditions unique to a minority group. Consequently, this celebration of being a minority can lead to feelings of dislike and tension from those in the majority. This is because there are rarely events to celebrate the traditions of the majority, or at least they are harder to realize, because they are more common and celebrated among so many that it does not seem as special. If a special event were to be held for the majority, many minority groups might feel that they are being put off because they are not in the majority and thus they must somehow be less significant.

Diversity is the epitome of the double-edged sword. It can make the world a better place, but at the same time it can force people apart. Even though there is a risk of upsetting a few by celebrating diversity rather than forcing conformity among everyone, the possibilities provided by diversity far outweigh any risks. There is one simple way of preventing these risks from becoming reality, though. As I mentioned earlier, all that is needed is to realize that if something is different, that does not mean that it is any better or any worse, just different.

Celine Kemp

## KINDS OF DIVERSITY

I HAVE BEEN GOING to George Mason for the past two years, though I usually don't spend much time there. I go to class and during my breaks I usually go to the library of the Johnson Center. Nevertheless, it is easy to get a good overview of Mason. The best way is to visit the Johnson Center and walk around campus. The Johnson Center is like the heart of the University where everyone goes to eat, study, meet friends, or just chill out. It gives a perfect picture of what Mason is all about: diversity.

The major kind of diversity is ethnicity. It is an obvious one. Walking throughout the campus, entering a classroom, or eating in the food court, no one can miss the ethnic diversity in the university.



The students (but also the employees) that attend and work at George Mason are from all over the country but also from all over the world. During my first days of class, people introduced themselves as being from California, New York, Colorado, Arizona, Germany, Austria, Ireland, Korea, Sierra Leone, Haiti, or Israel—the list is long and diverse.

At first it may be a bit shocking. How can such a small place in Northern Virginia contain people from so many different places? Well, in many ways Mason is the perfect representation of the capital of this country, a pure melting pot. Within the university's walls and ways, we can hear different languages spoken. On the students' public board, there are messages in Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, and many other languages. I would also mention the employees. Many workers in the food court in the Johnson Center are from Latin America and do not speak English as their native tongue. So being bilingual at Mason can be a quite useful tool just to get around and talk to people.

However, meeting people in this university has often been an incredible experience and journey. I have learned about countries I had never heard much about before—Eritrea, for example. I have shared the life and stories of persons I would never have met otherwise. The diversity of ethnicity also brings different religions. Many young Muslim women walk through the campus covered from head to toe in their *hijab*. Some Jewish men cover their head with a *yarmulke* or *kippah*. Other people wear shirts stating that “Jesus loves you.” Often these religious and ethnic groups seem to stay together and form their own clan, but the professors do a good job in assigning group work in order to reinforce the interaction in the classroom of persons who can learn so much from one another. So you may see groups of very diverse backgrounds working and talking together in the library.

George Mason also shows a high diversity in the age of its students. I have had classmates (and still have) who could have been the grandparents of the professors and others who are seventeen-years-old, having finished high school early. Other aspects of personal background are also different. Some students study part-time and work full-time, while others have never held a job in their life. Some live in the dorms and know exactly what the true definition of student's life is; others go back home after class to their responsibilities as children or parents. Such age and background differences don't seem to be a

problem when it comes to studying together, because all seem to know that they are just human beings trying to get an education.

A different kind of diversity I want to mention is the variety within Mason's academics. For me it is just amazing to have the possibility to explore and recognize what one really likes and would enjoy doing as a career. In addition, I think it is wonderful to think that anyone coming out of George Mason with a degree will definitely have a very different job than another student. The programs offered at the University can fulfill pretty much anyone's demands. They are arranged in such ways that it is often easy to find a minor that will complement a major by specializing it. I think the diversity of the programs and the location of the university are partially what brings such a diverse population of students. I have heard many times that George Mason is the university with the greatest diversity of students. I'm sure it is true, because it would only represent the capital area's own population. Nevertheless, I hope everyone does appreciate the diversity that the school offers because we are all so lucky to not have to blend within just one group of people.

Jona Pounds

## CONSIDERING DISABILITY

WHEN I STARTED to jot down some thoughts about diversity at George Mason, a version of a book title kept popping up in my head, something about diversity and what it means to me. The book in question belongs to my ten-year-old son and the title is *Asperger's... What Does It Mean To Me?* It is a workbook designed for kids afflicted with a form of high-functioning autism, commonly referred to as Asperger Syndrome. So what constitutes diversity? Are we only talking about ethnic minorities? There is age, sex, disability, sexual orientation, and a wide variety of other distinctions to be considered. What differentiations do we make between ethnicity and culture? Do people with a disability add something valuable to the spectrum of diversity or is it a separate category altogether? Another difficulty is that there will be people who feel that they have been left out in the cold—those individuals who believe that they have shared experiences with indi-

viduals who have historically suffered discrimination. In order to be able to effectively answer any question on diversity at Mason this rather vague word not only needs a clearer definition, but we also need to think about why it is important.

A short time ago, I was leafing through *Anthro News* from Washington State University and noticed a small clause on the last page.

Admission to Washington State University is granted without regard to race/ethnicity, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status, disability, or use of a service animal.

This clause was then followed with contact information for any person with a disability. My initial reaction when I read this was laughter, did they get every category? The laughter was then followed with the thought that, well, it is probably necessary, followed in turn by the question, why did they put it there? Do the administrators want to make sure that prospective students understand that nothing in their lives, other than academic achievements, will be taken into account when their applications are reviewed? Do they assume that they have the answer for what needs to be done in order to keep the application process fair, and if so what? Even if academic achievements are the only criteria, will it put the applicants on a more level playing field than if outside factors are also considered? There are many things that can affect grades. That old, tired, but still influential factor of socioeconomic status probably tops the list.

Back to the question of whom we refer to when talking about diversity. Where I live, I hear this term occasionally. The attitude of the people who mention how diverse this area is ranges from marveling about how great Northern Virginia is because of all the different languages spoken, availability of variety of foods and restaurants, and so forth to the ones who are clearly not too keen on how diverse the area is. However, in my experience the students at Mason don't really use the word diversity. There are off-hand remarks here and there, such as "everyone here is from somewhere else" or words to that effect. These utterances by no means state a feeling or preference, just a spoken fact. However, I presume that they are referring to ethnic diversity. I believe that when academia is bandying this word around it should be more inclusive.

It also seems to be the case that diversity is alright as long as it can be assimilated to fit white middle class values. From *Winnie the Pooh* to *Munich* the question is always how are they different from us? How are they like us? Do they want the same things as we do? Perhaps it is normal for people to understand others only in relation to their own traditions and beliefs. This applies to almost every type of difference that the University of Washington was able to think up for their diversity disclaimer. And, as a mother of an autistic son who is, and always will be, in the process of learning to navigate society dominated by people who are neuro-typical, it is important to me to understand where he falls on the diversity spectrum. I struggle with how much I can expect him to adapt to how other people (school administrators, teachers, other parents) think he should behave or, more to the point, how he should think. Why can't they try to somewhat adapt to him, or at least try to understand where he is coming from, outside of their own experiences. I have been to countless conferences with teachers and various support staff at the three elementary schools that my son has attended, and I can look forward to more conferences as my son begins middle school this fall.

Although my son now receives an hour per day assistance (he shares an assistant with another autistic boy who has more severe disabilities), this has not always been the case. During these meetings, the people that we (my husband and I) talk to usually seem to understand what to expect and are willing to handle his quirks. However, invariably we will receive a phone call or e-mail from an irritated and sometimes rude teacher who can't understand how someone with academic abilities that land him in the top, first percentile, isn't capable of putting his things away, understanding how queues work, or following seemingly simple instructions. Because my son has no organizational skills, he frequently gets low grades for late return of homework or projects that are often sitting in his backpack. I know he is not alone; children with Asperger Syndrome are usually highly organized or have no organizational skills at all.

What I wanted to say when I started to work on this paper was that we shouldn't underestimate the sophistication that young people who enter Mason have when it comes to ethnic diversity. Kids in this area often come from schools with highly diverse populations. When my son entered kindergarten in Arlington, white students in his school were 25 percent of the student populations, black students were 25

percent, Latin students were 25 percent, Asian students were 8 percent, and the remaining 17 percent fell under “others.” However, there are some exceptions. For example, almost no one in my former, somewhat confined neighborhood, which was nearly 100 percent white and within a scenic walk to the neighborhood school, actually sent their children there. There were nine boys who were my son’s age and shared one of many small playgrounds and pools in the area, but my son was the only one out of the bunch to go to the neighborhood school. All the other parents opted to bus their kids off to other schools. In spite of this, I do think that most kids entering Mason don’t give much thought to the diversity of the school. The parents who bus their kids away from the diverse local schools might also choose this option when the time comes to select a university.

This still brings us back to what can be included in diversity. Does it mean a group or groups of people who have historically been underrepresented in universities? Does this distinction include disabled individuals? I don’t think anyone would disagree that people with physical disabilities should be accommodated, but what about mental handicaps? Years of experience with teachers and administrators who professed to understand that autism is a disability and that my son needed special accommodations yet still expected him to act like a “normal” child have taught me to take nothing for granted. Ethnic diversity may now be the biggest identifying factor for diversity. However, in the coming years, the staff and teachers at Mason will need to deal with a significant number of young adults afflicted with autism, as well as other disabilities.



## II

### EXPERIENCING DIVERSITY

Alejandra Gonzalez-Arias

#### SORT OF DIVERSE?

THE WASHINGTON D.C. metropolitan area is an extremely diverse region. Some might even say that the area is a model of the American melting pot ideology. A trip to the local mall, gas station, or even grocery store can provide individuals with a vast array of cultural contacts and exposures. The exposure can be small and even seem as irrelevant as the exterior and physical differences apparent among individuals, but that can mislead people and leave a world of culture and heritage to the ignorance of blunder and mystery. The level of exposure can also be more extreme and offer educational insight into cultural differences that appear in a more contact-based setting—like having dinner at your Indian neighbor's house. Even George Mason's classroom setting seems to provide students with an opportunity to engage in culturally diverse interactions. Mason, plainly put, does indeed have a diverse student population.

But what does diversity mean? Are there different degrees of diversity? Does diversity entail a minimum standard of having an ethnically assorted group of people in a certain setting? Would meeting that standard make an organization or society diverse? Or does diversity only include those people who can be surrounded by unfamiliarity and truly understand and appreciate differences held between different people? Indeed, diversity is a concept that can be held and understood at different levels. And because of this, it is difficult for anyone to measure what the true meaning of diversity is, and whether or not the American ideal of a melting pot is true.

At the baseline, most people in the Mason community can be classified as diverse individuals just because they can tolerate being around people who are not like themselves. But if a random person were to sit down at, say, the Johnson Center—as I have on several occasions without particular thought to the concept of diversity—their

perception of what true diversity means could possibly be altered. This is because one would note through close observation that people with similar backgrounds still tend to congregate with each other. One could even pick out the sorority groups, the jock Frat boys sporting their Greek letters, the Latino groups, and so on. Call it a politically correct bystander's worst nightmare. "Say it isn't so!" But yes, it is indeed "so". Most people, it seems, would still rather surround themselves constantly by people who stem from similar backgrounds. Of course there are exceptions, and one will indeed find culturally diverse groups of people around campus. But, more often than not, my own personal observations are that the latter is less frequent. Further, these groups are often formed as a result of the need to fulfill class projects and study session requirements, and not through individual choice.

However, what kind of information can really be derived from observing people in social contexts? Just as physical appearances can give inaccurate insight into personal character, the same could be said about the information gathered in observing a group of people. In an ideal melting-pot world, people would probably go out of their way to engage actively with different cultures. Perhaps this ideal world will be realized sometime in the future, but for now and considering the recent prevalence of prejudice and racism around the world, getting along and putting up at least a front of trying to understand each other is a huge step forward. With that said, it is hard to say that people who do stick with "their kind" (for a lack of better wording) don't understand different cultures. It is in fact quite possible that the opposite is true.

For example, I don't necessarily go out of my way to only hang out with Hispanic people, but I do have Hispanic people in my circle of friends that do only hang out with other Latinos. For the most part, or at least from those that I have asked, I have gathered that it is because they just feel better around people who are like them. Now, growing up in a Latin American country myself, I can't help but wonder if this unity is brought about by some of the anti-American sentiment that is found in some countries—Panama for instance. The United States is indeed the land of opportunity for Global South citizens and, as a result, still attracts many foreigners. Yet many still refuse to forget the imperialistic control that the United States had on their territory. Many countries are still suffering the effects of those periods of control. This could be only one possibility out of many, however, affecting how



people group themselves. Other possibilities might include language barriers, personal interests that are only found in certain cultures, and church groups.

Although some of my friends might group together with people of similar backgrounds, they are still pretty educated in the sense of acknowledging differences between people and being able to respect them. I have never (well at least not yet) heard any of them make negative or ignorant comments about people of different races and cultures. This can be a good sign for the future. Or, perhaps I just happen to be surrounded by extremely observant and tolerant people because of the fact that I have met most of the people currently in my life at an institution of higher learning. The message that I am trying to convey here is that people who don't mingle with people of other races and cultures can still have a certain degree of understanding of the differences among groups of people. It is also quite possible to infer from my own experience that educated people might be more tolerant and diverse than those who are not. But that just might be a drastic generalization as well.

One might also find completely contrasting situations. For instance, I have a very good friend who is Caucasian and married to an African-American. She was born and raised in Potsdam, Pennsylvania, which from my understanding is nearly considered Quaker land. She also lived for quite some time in the Midwest during a three-year stint at the Air Force Academy in Colorado. Over the course of the time that I have known her, I have observed that she has more African-American friends than of any other race. She is also deeply immersed in hip hop culture and extremely interested in the cultural and historical roots of African-Americans. Stereotypically one might assume that someone with her general background would be less inclined toward an interracial marriage.

Does this mean that being immersed in hip hop culture makes individuals diverse? Now that would depend on who is calling the judgment, I'd say. My point is that there are different degrees of diversity and even selective diversity. In the case of my friend, she is diverse because she deeply embraces African-American culture, but try introducing her to a delectable fried plantain or a sip of some *sancocho de pollo* and she just might turn her head away in disgust. Sometimes people will crawl out of their familiar shell, but only go so far. And in some cases, the level of diversity present in people's daily lives can

possibly be dictated by the kind of situations and cultures these individuals experience in childhood. And such is the case with my friend, who has only ever dated African Americans.

George Mason has a pretty large international student population. I live with two roommates, one from Ukraine and the other from Pakistan. Sometimes while I am in a classroom setting, my mind will wander and I will wonder what might be going through an international student's mind. I grew up outside of the United States but I attended Department of Defense schools, so when my family relocated to the Washington D.C. area I did not go through a complete dose of culture shock. Okay, well with the exception of a few select times in my ninth grade gym class when I exclaimed "What do you mean you don't speak Spanish?" to a pair of Middle-Easterners. But besides that, I don't think I experienced what a true Central American who has recently migrated to the United States has gone through. Perhaps though, it might explain why I don't only have Latino friends.

I have also been lucky enough to have a family which has been willing to afford me experiences of traveling. As a result, I have experienced being immersed in different cultural settings aside from those found in America and Panama. I guess that you could say that the worst dose of cultural shock that I have ever experienced was when I spent three months in Germany. I remember it clearly. I had just separated from the military and was pondering the idea of studying overseas because my parents lived in Germany. So I figured, what the heck, what a perfect opportunity. After having finished a four-year tour in the Air Force, I decided a drastic change was just what I needed to start the next chapter in my life. I had it all set. I could learn a little German in no time, take accelerated classes, and visit a few castles here and there.

Unfortunately, I was unaware at the time of the difficulty that I would confront in trying to go about a regular life in Stuttgart, Germany. It was far from the "piece of cake" transition that I had envisioned. Being surrounded by people who spoke a completely different language than the ones I was accustomed to left me disconcerted. I would get frustrated going out to dinner because I would not know how to order food or even read the menu. When I did finally order something, I didn't like it. I was completely out of my element and wound up feeling lost and uncomfortable.

Well, needless to say, I didn't end up studying abroad in Germany but I did end up acquiring a taste for German beer and Doner Kebabs (which I later found out are actually from Turkey) before I left, but I do imagine that these tumultuous feelings might be similar to those felt by many in our local community and maybe even on campus. My experiences abroad have, in hindsight, instilled a new found sense of compassion and understanding for all kinds of people; we all have our own pasts, our own stories, and our own battles that we have been confronted with that have helped create our own individual forms of thought. Because of this, it is not safe to assume anything about anyone from a differing background, nor to attempt to fit people into a strictly defined mold. It is impossible to get the "big picture" of people unless you have actually been there right along side them during the filming of that big picture.

The meaning of diversity is constantly evolving. An area can be diverse demographically, but that's just a bunch of numbers measuring diversity in quantitative terms. Take the dance curriculum at Mason, for example. It can be considered diverse since one can take classes that include modern, social, tap, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Latino, and African. Or, people can be diverse because they hang out with people of different races. On the other hand, maybe the issue is more one of cultural understanding and acceptance, that some active degree of conscious awareness is necessary in order to be diverse. Being surrounded by unfamiliarity can shake up a person's world. Differences between people can stir up odd and weird emotions or even cause people to question what they have believed for their entire life. It is the way a person responds when confronted with such diverse situations that defines the level of the individual's diverseness. If a person freaks or lashes out, then it's pretty safe to say they aren't very diverse. But if a person absorbs diverse situations and can gain a different perspective from the encounter, then there is definitely a certain degree of diversity present. One might also say that we are all different in our own way, even if these differences aren't necessarily apparent. So, I guess we are all sort of diverse, in our distinct little ways.

Katrina Crawford

## DISCOVERING DIVERSITY

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY is extremely diverse in race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, politics, etc. The main outcome of this large amount of diversity seems to be a significant decrease in discrimination in these areas as opposed to other, less diverse, universities. Having visited other universities and heard accounts from friends, it is quite obvious that locations that are dominated by one race or culture are much less accepting of people unlike themselves. Additionally, not only is diversity a factor but the age at which people are exposed to diversity is also extremely important. For example, people who are exposed to such a diverse area as the Washington metropolitan area at the age of forty or fifty seem to be considerably less adaptable to it than college-age students. Beyond simple acceptance of diversity, students at George Mason seem to embrace the differences among themselves and try to branch out into other cultural arenas. There is a large degree of interracial dating, availability of international cuisine, and interest in international customs. Diversity is especially evident and useful in the classroom setting as students are able to hear multiple perspectives on different topics. The primary benefit of all these adaptations to diversity is a reduction in discrimination.

When comparing the diversity at Mason with students attending other state universities, I quickly discovered a very different ideology surrounding the different races and cultures. At Mason it is so commonplace to walk out of a classroom and hear an array of different languages that no one even thinks twice about it after being here a few days. However, this is not the case at other schools. Friends who are attending other schools have been quite taken aback when visiting Mason and have commented on the strangeness of cultural intermixing. Even beyond simply viewing such diversity as odd, some people even see it as undesirable. Specifically, I have heard accounts of different cultures and customs being mocked at other schools. For example, I have heard of Caucasian students making fun of Muslim girls who wear the *burqa* because they are not used to seeing such attire. Such cultural variety is so common at Mason that no one would even

stop to think about seeing a *burqa*. It is extremely advantageous to be exposed to cultural differences such as clothing and other languages in a college setting to stunt any intolerance which may be present.

Furthermore, being exposed to diversity at a college age as opposed to middle or older age seems to be more productive in reducing discriminatory thought. Ideally, exposure to diversity should be given at a child's age as to best avoid any intolerance of differences. However, should that not be a possibility because of location or other circumstances, exposure at the college level is still beneficial. My parents grew up in the south when high schools were still segregated and the only races present were Caucasian and African American. We moved to the Washington metropolitan area eleven years ago and I have seen how differently the diversity of the area has affected us. While I attended a diverse high school and later George Mason, my parents still seemed to associate with people similar to themselves. Many of my friends were of different backgrounds and ethnicities, which surprised my parents. My parents were not racist or discriminatory, but they sometimes seemed to react to other cultures as if they were novelties. Moreover, many of the neighbors I have had who moved to this area during middle age reacted in the same way. Although not actively discriminatory, they have remained largely detached from other cultural influences. This difference is most evident when compared to their children who, like me, are so immersed in other cultural influences that it seems completely natural.

Another topic raised by the diversity at Mason is interracial dating. My southern parents are very opposed to dating outside of one's race for reasons they cite as "cultural incompatibility." However, although people at Mason may come from all over the world, or may be of different ethnicities yet born in America, they all have many things in common from being at the university together. Additionally, the constant exposure to different cultures primes the students for situations such as these in that they are better able to accept and adapt to differences they might encounter in the world. Personally, I have dated a few people of different ethnicities and did not experience any large problems that I did not expect based on my prior knowledge of the cultural differences. Currently, I am engaged to a Kurdish Muslim whereas I am a Caucasian Christian. I have yet to see anyone at Mason make a derogatory comment about interracial dating or relations. However, I have seen how people like my parents and especially people living in

less diverse areas have reacted adversely to such situations. It seems that the more one is exposed to other cultures the less problematic the differences between them seem. Furthermore, at less diverse universities, interracial dating is not as common both because other races are not as prevalent and because it is not as accepted. I feel that interracial dating should not be problematic for anyone if it is not problematic for the two people involved. Therefore, I am in strong support of exposure to diversity since it seems to alter any negative perceptions people might have about interracial and intercultural dating.

Beyond intercultural dating, Mason students are interested in other cultures' customs, food, clothing, etc. This is shown by the very popular International Week held every spring in the Johnson Center. During this time, fashion shows for other cultures and a variety of cultural foods are presented to the student population. Many students participate in or attend these events and look forward to them every year. I have not heard of many events as extensive as this International Week at other colleges, and feel that it is somewhat unique to Mason. International Week seems to serve both as a venue for students to celebrate their cultural differences as well as integrate other cultures into their own identity. A large difference that distinguishes Mason students from students of other colleges is this desire to incorporate other cultures and ideologies into their own.

In the classroom setting, the diversity of the college is extremely useful in exploring topics from different perspectives. At colleges where most of the students are of one race or from one similar background, it is sometimes difficult to fully understand various viewpoints. Especially regarding international topics in politics and public policy, it is helpful to be able to converse and debate with actual citizens of other nations. Debates between students of different backgrounds are especially interesting as points are brought up by both sides that are often new and surprising to the class. For example, in my honors class (*Contemporary Society in Multiple Perspectives*), we attempted to explore public policy from the viewpoint of the different countries involved. Although we had a very good professor who was knowledgeable in this field as well as plentiful reading material, the best parts of the class were the presentations and the debates. During these times, the class was able to not only see the facts as they were presented in the news, but also the opinions of people who had actually lived in the situations and countries we were discussing. One step down from hav-

ing a first hand account of an event is hearing someone else retell what they witnessed. This, beyond any of the other supplemental materials for the class, was what everyone learned the most from. In actuality, the entire university is a forum of this sort, where everyone has the opportunity to educate the rest of the population about their beliefs and opinions.

Through exposure and education, the diversity at George Mason University serves as a means to help eliminate the discrimination of different ethnicities and cultures among its students. The level of such diversity is unique to this college and provides an invaluable experience to its students. It is especially important for college students to experience this level of diversity while they are still forming their own opinions about the world. George Mason also provides education to older students who benefit from a variety of cultures and ethnicities as well. Hopefully, the atmosphere the university supports will eventually spread to other colleges and communities so that everyone will be more understanding and accepting of different types of people. It would be wonderful if one day topics such as interracial dating were no longer taboo in any part of the country. All colleges could at least benefit from having a variety of viewpoints present in every classroom which would allow better debate of various topics. Most importantly, the diversity at Mason provides the students a door through which they can explore the world without even leaving campus. Overall, students at this university have, in my opinion, continuously embraced the various cultural influences they encounter and used them to enrich their own lives and ideas.

Holly Moir

## DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

**D**IVERSITY AT GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY is one of the school's greatest attributes, particularly in regard to non-traditional age students, students from all walks of life, and students with Asian heritage. Their contribution is often especially clear in the classroom. In terms of age, I have benefited greatly from taking many courses with at least one non-traditional age student. I cannot overstate how much

these students add to the learning experience for everyone (often including the professor) and how glad I am that George Mason is in a location and has attitudes and policies that encourage such members of the community to take courses. Non-traditional age students bring a wisdom that college students cannot help but lack, and these older students bring professional expertise from their past and current employment, as well as first-hand experience of other cultures gained in years of traveling or living abroad. For example, in a course on Renaissance Art History we were all thrilled to have a retired doctor and his wife, a retired nurse, in the class, since they frequently offered a medical perspective of figures rendered in painting. Looking at a slightly odd altar piece, those students were the only ones who realized the figures were anatomically incorrect, which led to a class discussion of the artist's motives and the meaning behind such elongated human figures. In addition, when the professor mentioned a prominent art historian who employs medical technology to view sketches and paintings hidden beneath complete paintings (a common practice in Western art), these students were able to explain the differences between such equipment as MRI machines and CAT scans, and how such tools could aid in art investigation.

In another course concerning the history and current status of monuments and memorials, our class discussion often turned to issues of UNESCO and UN World Heritage Sites; again, the non-traditional age students proved a boon to the class, as one recounted her stay at St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, Egypt, a major World Heritage Site. Another student had the class transfixed with tales of her year in Florence, reminding us of the importance of context in viewing artworks and in considering historical background—many of the Florentine interiors depicted in our slides had changed considerably since the slides were made; such facts are not just interesting, but might avoid confusion or embarrassment should a student travel to Florence.

In that same course, our international students were also a blessing. For instance, as a final project each student had to make a lengthy class presentation on a monument or memorial not covered in class. The student from Sri Lanka gave an intriguing presentation, with insightful text and excellent photographs she had taken while last in her country. She did a superb job explaining about the rock-cut palace high on a mountain in Sri Lanka, which we most likely would never



have heard of if it were not for her—this would have been a great loss, as the palace is magnificent on its own, and overwhelming considering the elevation to which all furnishings had to be transported to be placed in the palace. The student even recited some local folklore and superstitions about the site (invaluable in providing context) and attested to the truth of claims that the palace is constantly buffeted by gale-force winds. She provided excellent first-hand oral history.

We were fortunate to have the Sri Lankan student in class in other instances, too, as when we discussed the issue of the antiquities trade and looting worldwide. Students were incredulous about a scholarly article we read detailing how Indian courts technically consider cast-bronze images of the Hindu god Shiva to be physical embodiments of Shiva himself, for the sake of simplifying litigation and making it easier to convict criminals of antiquities theft. This is a major problem in countries such as India with a wealth of material culture whose protection proves too much for overburdened local officials. Noting the students' skepticism, the student from Sri Lanka volunteered that laws governing antiquities are so strict that she could not bring her furniture from her homeland to her new house in the United States. Despite the appropriate paperwork proving her ownership of the items and their status as family heirlooms, laws stipulate that handmade goods crafted prior to 1960 have to remain in their country of origin! This provided greater intellectual depth in our discussion, as we progressed from considering how sad it is that antiquities are looted, to debating epistemological issues such as how to determine age, value, and authenticity of artifacts, to considering how to discourage looting given that locals often desperately need the money and that the only way to prevent a demand for antiquities is to close down the art market. As long as there is one art lover somewhere, looting will most likely always be a problem.

Also in the class on monuments and memorials, we were fortunate to have a student from Pakistan who had traveled extensively throughout Asia before enrolling at Mason. She assured us of the unfathomable magnitude of the holdings of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, as curators claim that less than one-tenth of the collection is on display, and she remembered the display rooms as nearly endless. She also shared with us via PowerPoint her photographs of travel in China, which led to many interesting discussions, as when we noticed

that there is now a Starbucks coffee shop in the former Forbidden City—what a testament to globalization.

International students and those with international heritage were especially helpful in Art History and History classes concerning other cultures. A student from Greece helped with pronunciation and translation of Greek terms in our course on Early Christian and Byzantine art, and students enrolled in the Indian History class this semester had the opportunity to attend an exhibition of authentic Indian *bhangra* dancing held in the Student Union building, which was performed by members of Mason's Hindu Student Union. Students in such classes can also watch their peers from South Asia, primarily India and Pakistan, play cricket and provide insight into the traditions of that area of the world.

The students and the professor of my World Religions course were fortunate to take the course at an institution as diverse as Mason. Many students served as living primary sources and were experts on their religion. Each time the professor introduced a new religion in his lecture, we had at least one student representative of that religion; this added immensely to our understanding of the faiths and has made me vividly remember religion class—who can forget the Jewish student gently laughing when she told us that her grandmother, an Orthodox Jew, took the Sabbath prohibition of work so seriously that she pre-tore sheets of toilet paper the night before Sabbath every week. In addition to Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists, we had members of the Jain and Sikh religions as well. They also enhanced our learning experience; we were fascinated to find that strict Jain priests constantly sweep the ground before them as they walk, to ensure they do not tread on insects or other living creatures—these priests take the faith's prohibition of killing very seriously. We learned from the Sikh student that Sikhs, unlike Westerners, regard the number 13 as lucky, and that members of the Khalsa, a Sikh military and civic brotherhood, never cut their hair following initiation into the Khalsa group. One Muslim student told of his pilgrimage to Mecca, and agreed with the author of our textbook that the pressing crowds near the Ka'ba were quite disconcerting and overwhelming. The Muslim students helped clarify the definitions of terms we found confusing, such as *umalah* and *umma* and assured us, against all opposition, that it is possible to fast from sun-up to sun-down (the proposition did not sound good to many spoiled suburbanites in the class).

The Hindu students in class were able to explain why it was that the professor's Hindu friend also accepted Christianity, noting that a tolerant, multifaceted religion such as Hinduism allows for ideas of other faiths when possible. In this case, Hindus view Christianity as an excellent example of the *bhakti* path to salvation—the path of loving devotion to God. Having students of diverse faiths in class ensured that we pursued a more in-depth class discussion on each religion. Were it not for the testimonies of multinational students, we would not have had so many questions to ask or have been able to carry on such an informed debate—no matter how knowledgeable the professor was, certain impressions and feelings about a faith are known only to those who practice it. The international student body ensured that we reached some comfort with discussing difficult ideas, such as eternal damnation. Nobody wanted to broach such prickly topics and I think we all felt relieved when a student of one faith volunteered to discuss seeming inconsistencies in his or her religion, rather than leaving it to someone unfamiliar with that faith to question it. Student diversity helps guarantee the freedom of expression, inquiry, and debate necessary to any successful educational institution. To end on a lighter note, suffice to say that on the first day of my Arts of India class, barely anyone responded to the professor's question about examples of exotic or eroticized perceptions of the East—only the Indian student was brave enough to exclaim: the Kama Sutra, what's that all about?

Tonka Dobрева

## DIVERSITY AMERICAN STYLE

I HAD NEVER SERIOUSLY thought about diversity until I came to the United States four years ago. I am from Bulgaria, a country with an extremely monotone society, despite the minorities that make up more than fifteen percent of its population. My classroom, neighborhood, family, and circle of friends have always consisted of white ethnic-Bulgarian people. Moreover, a Gallup poll from December of 2005 named my country one of the most racist societies—along with Turkey and Serbia. Diversity, therefore, was never on the discussion

agenda in or out of the classroom and the attitude of our ethnic majority was, and still is, largely one of denial and ignorance.

When I came to the United States to attend college, I was propelled into rural West Virginia, where my small college was relatively diverse, and my classroom and circle of friends included people from different cultures, religions, ethnicities, and races. As part of that diversity myself, I was becoming more aware and fascinated by other people's backgrounds, and pleased with their excitement about my own origin. But it was not until I set foot on the George Mason campus, that I realized what diversity really meant. As Mason was declared the most diverse university in the nation, I thought that it would be a perfect place to start exploring the different dimensions of diversity.

Diversity enriches the learning process in the classroom. The classroom was the first setting where I encountered diversity. I will never forget my Introduction to International Relations course. In-class debates were particularly interesting because students from all over the world would take part in discussing controversial issues such as the Bush Administration's foreign policy, U.S. foreign aid, and the war on terrorism. I was fascinated to hear different points of view reflected through the prism of people's culture, background, and life experience. It made me more alert to other perspectives, provoked me to look at knowledge in a different way, and helped me evaluate my own outlook on different issues. Education in a diverse classroom is a new way of learning for me, because it helps me think more deeply than the text alone allows. It makes me re-evaluate my arguments and thoughts before I reach conclusions and build theses in research papers.

Another major diversity feature in the classroom, which helped me acquire and evaluate knowledge better, was the diverse faculty. At Concord University in West Virginia, all of my professors were white American males. At Mason, I have to admit, it was challenging for me at the beginning to be taught by a professor who was a non-native speaker with a pronounced accent. It was even difficult at the beginning to take notes and follow the lecture. Once I got used to the accent, however, I realized that culture could affect teaching and even grading. Our professor repeatedly reminded us that, where he came from, students study much more than American college students do. Therefore, his assignments were harder and required more time to complete. But what was more important than the difficulty of the assignments was

the perspective and approach taken by the professor. Just as students express different visions in class, reflected by their life and culture, so do professors.

Diversity in the classroom at Mason is not limited to the different perspectives of students and teachers, but it encompasses the curriculum as well. My introductory communications class included culturally sensitive communication clues and techniques. The teacher, a foreigner herself, did a great job emphasizing and explaining the concept of culturally sensitive communication in casual conversations or formal interviews. All of the above components of diversity in the classroom made my learning experience at Mason more complete and thoughtful. I was able to recognize the influence that diversity in terms of race, culture, religion, or age, has on the way people think and process information.

Diversity provokes further exploration. It motivated me to go back and re-evaluate many issues in my own country. I was so intrigued by diversity in the United States, and at Mason in particular, that I wanted to find out how Bulgarian society today treats minorities. That is why I undertook my current research on Bulgarian media and minorities. When I was enrolled in my departmental honors program, I decided to tackle the question of how contemporary Bulgarian media presents minorities in articles, columns, interviews, and reports. As media in my country is one of the voices of the ethnic Bulgarian majority, it would be indicative of some mainstream feelings and attitudes.

Diversity does not permit definitions. Another diversity endeavor I am involved in is George Mason's Student Media Focus on Diversity. It is a project that encompasses a publication, accompanied by video and audio supplements, which examines diversity and its dimensions on our campus. This experience provokes me to not only explore campus diversity more deeply, but also to define it in common terms. It has been particularly hard for me, however, because the term itself does not allow unification. We cannot simply identify students by placing them in exclusive categories such as ethnicity, race, age, or disability. How do we unify all Hispanic students? Isn't a Bolivia-born Hispanic student different from a Texan Hispanic student, who is completely different from a Virginia-born Hispanic student? When I met with my two faculty advisers and we discussed training writers for the publication, one of them suggested teaching the basics of diversity. This leads to the question of what exactly the basics of diversity are. If

we cannot unify students, how can we teach our writers and reporters to act in a specific situation, only by placing their interviewee in a category—Asian, Hispanic, Disabled, Veteran, Hawaiian? How do we make our questions culturally sensitive yet also politically correct? Do we use the same set of questions for all students, or do we adjust them depending on the individual? Also, how do we know that if we interview José from Mexico, his experience will be indicative of all Mexican students on campus? Sure, we might be able to capture and address the basic features that unite all Mexican students, but this might not be enough to accurately convey the true diverse spirit on our campus. These, and other challenges we have yet to face, make defining diversity a hard task.

Diversity is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. I have heard many people use the phrase “celebrate diversity.” It has been a logo and a title for numerous events. I have used it myself in one of my articles last semester. However, by using the word in such a context, we make it sound like an accomplishment. What some people fail to realize is that diversity itself is a privilege. It is true that it takes effort to achieve it, but the hard work and the meaningful achievements start after it is accomplished. Diversity brings along challenges that need to be negotiated and constantly worked on. Merely being diverse and celebrating this fact is not enough. We need to focus on the effort to bargain with diversity. We redefine our ethics, words, norms, behavior, and attitudes. We try to be sensitive and considerate of other people, who are different from us. We strive to avoid conflict and sometimes compromise even our true selves.

Diversity comes with a price. I came to realize the price of diversity two years ago when I married my husband, who is from Peru. Since my own family is not diverse at all, I faced diversity at home for the first time. I did not think it would be hard, because both of us spoke English and had similar visions about many aspects of life. When I met his family, however, I faced obstacles I had never encountered before. The culture and customs, as well as their outlook on life, were very different from mine. We never got into serious conflicts because of it, but it was definitely a hindrance in our communication and understanding of each other. It takes a lot of effort on both sides to negotiate our place in the new families without compromising completely who we really are. We try to preserve our culture and ethnicity and at the same time accept, tolerate, even participate in unfamiliar

customs and routines. I have even thought about our future children and how we could negotiate both cultures to unify them into one, in which our offspring will grow.

Diversity is the road to compromising, growing, and learning in a new way, which cannot be achieved in a monotone society. It challenges you to rethink and reevaluate your life and principles. It makes you wonder about the different dimensions of right and wrong, good and bad, and everything in between. Diversity is a term that we can try to explore and yet can never define or understand completely. That is why many people choose to make it an end, while indeed it is the means to change people and society. For some societies, like the United States, diversity is embraced as a virtue, while for others, like Bulgaria, it is seen as a disadvantage. Therefore, we should not celebrate the mere existence of diversity. Rather, we have to look at how it changes us individually and celebrate the growth that it brings about. If we have not grown with diversity or learned from it, we cannot claim to know it, let alone celebrate it.

Blair Rhodes

## A SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY

**G**EORGE MASON UNIVERSITY has grown by leaps and bounds in the past thirty-three years. George Mason goes beyond the classroom in encouraging students to succeed; it fosters and instills a spirit of belonging. Each university has characteristics in which all members of the institution express pride and honor. George Mason has many areas in which its Patriots should feel proud, but the one area that is held in the highest esteem is that George Mason is the most diverse school in the nation.

Although the dictionary ascribes diversity with only one meaning, it is interpreted in many ways. For example, to some, diversity could just mean Mason has very good representation of the various cultures and ethnicities of the world. Others may feel that diversity means there are students and staff members from different socio-economic backgrounds, while others believe that the root of our diversity is derived from being near a large metropolitan area. All of these explanations

are in some way correct but I personally believe diversity means much more than these various factors because they only contribute to diversity, they do not define it.

George Mason University is the most diverse school in the nation, but why? Many schools are outside of metropolitan areas, and many schools are in metropolitan areas. Why are those schools not more diverse than Mason? Students all over the country and all over the world go to various schools for different reasons, but why are those schools not more diverse? As a student at Mason, the only answer to these questions that set Mason apart from any other colleges or universities is that diversity is not just a physical depiction of community, rather it is the spirit of community. The difference between other schools and Mason is that they instill in students a tolerance of others' differences, but Mason does not instill just tolerance, it also instills acceptance.

To be tolerant and to be accepting are two completely different ways of thinking. The synonyms alone of each word express the main differences between the terms. The term tolerant can also be expressed as open-minded, liberal, or charitable. Although the synonyms sound very positive and in many cases are positive, those terms only reach the surface. To be tolerant is to recognize differences and to keep personal prejudices internal. Charity and liberality are often effects of tolerance. Acceptance has a different caliber of words to express its meaning. Examples are recognition, taking, and giving. At first glance, many would think that the synonyms for tolerance seem better than the synonyms for acceptance, but if people look deeper into the terms they will see an unequivocal difference. Acceptance requires both parties to be able to go through a process together. In this process they recognize their differences and they take the differences in others and implement them into their lives. In essence, when people are accepting, their initial prejudices are taken away, and they gain new insight on their lives and on the lives of others. Acceptance builds community; it builds comfort to ask questions and to seek answers. Tolerance, by contrast, promotes neither comfort nor the ability to seek what is unknown.

Acceptance is a lifestyle at George Mason. It is incorporated in students' lectures, majors, and extra-curricular activities, but it is also a personal choice. Mason acknowledges the capacities of each member of the Mason family. Not everyone is at the same level of under-



standing, but what defines the Mason Patriots is the determination and the zeal to improve. We all have strengths, and we all have areas that need more attention. Mason gives everyone the same opportunity to grow and develop not just intellectually but as a human being, as a global citizen.

Acceptance cultivates diversity from the grass roots. When an individual is comfortable with others, they become comfortable with themselves. The spirit of community gives students a feeling that regardless of who they are, it is okay. The cultivation of diversity through acceptance is one of the many reasons why students excel in the classroom. It is also one of the many reasons why there are over 200 student organizations. When an institution gives the power of growth to the students, and trusts the students in their efforts, change and betterment seem to be the inevitable outcome. Not only do students feel accepted, but students feel safe. It gives members of the university the ability to experience, celebrate, and learn about the world in which they live, and to see with their own eyes the beauty of the human race.

Lessons such as those, celebrating and experiencing the beauty of the human race, are not lessons that are evident in the world in which we live today. With so much focus on physical appearance and differences, it is unfortunate that many individuals miss the opportunity of personal growth. George Mason embraces the opportunity of internal growth and encourages the idea of diversity in every aspect of university life. With this constant drive for growth, students, faculty and staff alike are one step ahead of others in the career force and in everyday interaction. The members of Mason are one step ahead solely because their perspectives on themselves and on the world do not change, but are broadened. This broadening of perspective brings forth a more vivid and more passionate love for life.

My personal experience with Mason attests to the passionate love for life. The spirit of community that is seen and felt is one of the main reasons why I wanted to attend Mason. This is only my second year, and I am so incredibly happy every day for making this choice. For most of my life, I have been very different. I grew up in a fairly diverse school in the sense that there were students of different cultures, but the students did not interact with each other. I became accustomed to being the only African American in most of my classes, and I became very accustomed to having friends who were not of my race. Going

through school made me really value the importance of the person and not the physical appearance. Growing up as a Baha'i instilled in me, religiously and eventually outwardly, that we all are the same and should live our lives together. My religion made me value the differences in myself and in others more than what many could imagine.

Now looking back at where I was, and seeing where I am today, although oneness and diversity has always been a major part of me, it is great and it is encouraging to be part of something that practices the same beliefs that I do. Not only does Mason practice the beliefs of oneness and of diversity but it gives those affected by those beliefs a sense of ownership and pride. We as students—if we like the environment—must continue to foster the environment. That tradition in my opinion is far more important than any other tradition that has been commemorated at institutions for the last hundreds of years. Besides the fact that I am partial to Mason, the tradition of diversity is much more important than other traditions because in keeping that tradition we are bettering others as well as ourselves. We are making a difference in a world where acceptance is not even permissible.

Yes, I love George Mason. I am very happy that I made the decision to pursue my higher education here. I am very honored that I am at an institution that values me because of everything I have gone through and because of everything that I am. I am privileged to be part of an institution that has a tradition, in that I, along with every other Mason student, professor, administrator, and staff member, am in charge of maintaining the spirit of community and diversity. This spirit of community is not just a quality that only Mason has, but can be obtained by any institution. The only factor in spreading the tradition is that there must be a need and there must be ownership in seeing it through. Individuals need to step forward and take pride in others. When each person begins to act, change will not just be seen but it will be felt. Collectively, with everyone's effort, the spirit of community and true diversity can be achieved.

George Mason is not just my school, it is everyone's school. I am not the only one proud, everyone should be proud. The spirit only develops when the people find the spirit within them. Mason has a diversifying, celebratory, and rejoicing spirit. Now that I have the same spirit, it is my duty to make sure that any other soul who sets foot on Mason's campus feels what I feel, sees what I see, and loves what I love.

Stephanie Engerer

## THE LIMITS OF DIVERSITY

AS WITH ANY OPINION piece, it is good for the reader to have at least a short background on the author. This is because one's background, education, and other extenuating circumstances combine to form preconceived notions on any topic. Therefore, before I address the issue of diversity at George Mason directly, I will first give a small history of how a girl from Pennsylvania ended up at one of the most diverse universities in the country.

Growing up in a relatively small community in south central Pennsylvania, my exposure to national and cultural diversity was at a minimum. My school system consisted of mostly typical white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) students, usually of middle to middle-upper class economic standing. Several exceptions existed, but what is most interesting is how these exceptions affected, and were affected by, the overall climate of the school and the community. The acceptance level for a "different" person or belief system depended upon several interdependent factors, particularly personality, the nature of the difference, and how the "different" person presented that difference. For example, students of Islamic faith were treated with varying degrees of acceptance or rejection. If the given student, while holding a certain value system to be true, did not impose those beliefs on others and in addition did not outwardly display those values, they were more often than not absorbed into the school culture. On the other hand, if a student wore a traditional head covering, that student would be ostracized and subject to daily taunts from peers.

Diversity with respect to race received a slightly warmer welcome. While the number of African Americans in my school was very small, those who were in attendance were given equal respect and were often some of the more popular students. Again, this was based partially on their personality, but it was also based on a tendency for younger generations to be more accepting of a person's race than a different religion. This is perhaps evident of what people hold most dear. While race is a very important factor in how one is viewed by the world, perhaps in the world of today religion holds an equal or greater place in society. In the same respect, people are more inclined to hold their

religious beliefs as a deciding factor in how they will view others of the same or different values.

I also think diversity and diversity issues are very much affected by the differences between the generations. Having worked at a florist shop, primarily with older Caucasian women, I have heard many comments when topics such as interracial dating were brought up. Usually, the comments were not favorable. While I initially tried to explain how it was really not as big an issue as they seemed to believe, I quickly tired of trying to force the issue and began biting my tongue—as I suspect other younger employees had done in the past.

When the time came to pick a college or university, I knew I wanted out of the traditional white suburban world and wanted to be exposed to other belief systems and ways of thinking, not so much to alter my own as to have a greater appreciation for the intricacies of global interactions. Thus, when I received what seemed to be my millionth advertisement from a college, I paid little attention to it. However, as I read through the pages and admired the pictures of autumn days with quotes of some of the great thinkers, I took to heart the images of diversity. George Mason heralded itself as a diverse, innovative university that could make anyone's college experience a more fulfilling time. From the beginning, the powers that be wanted to establish a reputation as a diverse university, partly in an attempt to attract a greater pool of potential students. I eagerly scheduled my appointment to tour the campus and was a bit surprised at the lack of diversity I saw when I first arrived; I would later discover that the day of the week greatly affected the diversity level. However, something inside of me sensed this was where I wanted to spend the next four years of my life. So I finalized my proposal for admission and began a journey that would end up being very eye-opening and that would confirm some of my preconceived notions of diversity, and disprove others.

During the first few weeks on campus, images were in abundance of the diversity Mason had promised. Faces representing countless countries and nationalities intermingled with those whose image was close to my own reflection. Where it would be unusual to find a Muslim wearing even a head wrap in my hometown, here *burqas* were commonplace and few even batted an eyelash. During my first week, my classes and the student unions were filled to the brim with a sea of individuals. I marveled at the new and interesting opinions

shared in classes on such topics as globalization, the consequences of war, and democracy. Later on in the semester, there was an entire week devoted to the celebration of the level of international diversity unique to Mason. Students representing a wide variety of countries gathered to share their heritage and customs with the student body including food, dance, and other practices. Flags from each country adorned the ceiling of the Johnson Center and served as a visual reminder of separate entities making up the entirety of George Mason's student body.

I expected that, along with the obvious exposure to other cultures at such events, there would be a certain sense of friendship and bonding that would come from exposure to various nationalities and other related differences. What I have discovered over the past three years, much to my chagrin, is that while there is a textbook level of diversity, the close, most intimate friendships seem to be confined to those most closely resembling oneself. Whereas in my small town those of a different national origin, religion, or other difference had no choice but to fit in, that is not the case in Northern Virginia. Because there are so many members of a given group, those same group members are able to interact in a more homogeneous environment with respect to their close social circles. Although I have worked closely with people of different nationalities on an academic basis with great ease and fulfillment, rarely does that interaction translate over to my social life with any great regularity. I do, however, have close social interactions with those of different races, ages, and sexual orientations. So it appears to me that differences based on nationality, in particular those from the Middle East, may represent a new sector of diversity, not yet fully integrated and accepted into overall social interactions. Whether this is a conscious choice by either party is debatable. This is comparable to other waves of immigration spoken of in countless history courses. As students we have learned that, before the Civil War, immigration to America was more of a melting pot in that there was far more assimilation. On the other hand, after the war, immigrants were not received as well and as a result, and perhaps by choice, tended to stay close to those of their own nationality. So too has it been with modern day immigrants from Middle Eastern countries. Especially after September 11, 2001, stereotypes have popped up in abundance preventing any real integration from occurring.

At Mason, some of the perplexing opposing aspects of diversity may be explained by the number of commuting students. It is one

thing to accept and participate in diverse interactions in the classroom, but it is quite another to have that diversity in the dorm, the hall, or the next bed. The diversity that usually fills the walkways all but evaporates on the weekends when the campus suddenly transforms into a more typical college environment. Those still on campus are rich in diversity, but less representative of the international cultural diversity usually associated with Mason.

Even though the diversity at Mason does not encompass as many of the personal interactions I initially anticipated, its benefits should not be slighted. Had I chosen the more typical college destination of the Penn State University Park campus, my exposure to any form of international or cultural diversity would be pitiful. If nothing else, my level of understanding of different viewpoints on the world stage has increased exponentially. I am now able to understand both sides of issues (such as the conflict between Israel and Palestine) and put faces to both sides of the struggle. It is one thing to see occurrences on the television. One can easily disassociate oneself from the conflict and troubled sector of the world population. But once one has sat in a classroom with students born in these countries and heard stories of their families' struggles, the newspaper headlines come alive, as the human connection hits home. My only hope is that eventually deeper, more intimate connections can be formed among all students. Hearing a fellow student's stories in class is touching, but it pales in impact to hearing that same story from the mouth of a friend.

### III

## PARADOXES OF DIVERSITY

John W. Thomas

### MARKETING AND REALITY

IF A PROSPECTIVE student on a college search looks up George Mason in the *Princeton Review*, “diversity” is one of the first terms they will encounter. Diversity is an extremely important theme to the university, and George Mason makes a significant effort to reinforce this notion. From freshmen orientations to commencement ceremonies, diversity is mentioned repeatedly in speeches given by university staff as well as by students. However, despite the amount of exposure the word diversity seems to get, the implications of a diverse environment are rarely openly explored. The effects of diversity vary based on the university environment, either inside or outside of the classroom. Inside classes, a diverse student population often results in the sharing of ideas and perspectives which increase the depth of discussions. Outside of the classroom, the presence of diversity allows students to socialize with people of backgrounds which are either similar or different from their own, depending on how they want to structure their personal lives on campus. By establishing and promoting a diverse student body, Mason is developing an image for the school that is closely tied to globalization, another increasingly important trend.

According to the web site of George Mason’s Office of Diversity Programs and Services, the primary function of the department is to “Assist the University in recruiting, retaining, and graduating Asian Pacific American; African American/Black; American Indian; Hispanic/Latino; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning students through a variety of programs and services.” By this definition, the university is focusing on cultural, racial, and sexual diversity when it comes to their official policies. Other factors associated with diversity such as gender and religion are not listed, primarily because the presence of such divisions is generally taken for granted in modern American society. The divisions created under these lines

in the past have been largely overcome. The types of diversity which George Mason's Office of Diversity Programs and Services lists are currently more relevant political issues associated with policies such as affirmative action, and it is crucial that the university supports these initiatives if they want to promote a public image based heavily on diversity.

In a sense, diversity is used as a selling point with two sides: the reactions to diversity from people who represent the majority and the reactions from people who represent various minorities. These two sides are not totally exclusive, as there would be room for opinions to cross over between the two sides. However, the reactions to diversity between majorities and minorities probably vary. As someone who represents the cultural and racial majority of the university, I would be hesitant to assume the opinions of minority students without conducting interviews, but from my own perspective, the use of diversity as a sales pitch implies good things about the school. In a diverse environment, there is less likely to be a standard set of guidelines about how everyone should act and think. Instead, differences between people are more likely to be acceptable. Opinions on certain matters will vary, and those who choose to think along different lines will not be outcast by the majority. In many situations, different opinions will even be embraced, as they will lead to discussions which contain additional depth and insight and occur both inside and outside the classroom.

Inside the classroom, diversity among the students often benefits the class as a whole. However, a certain type of class is essential for this to happen. Three factors that lead to this type of environment include the classroom topic, the class size, and the professor's willingness to promote participation within the class. Class topics which benefit from diversity are those which allow for various perspectives on the subject. Classes where the material is more quantitative in nature, such as math, science, or technology programs benefit less from diversity than classes where different opinions are embraced. As an anthropology major, I have attended many classes where diversity has benefited the class greatly. If the class is about a certain part of the world, such as an anthropology or sociology class on a particular region, international students are often able to provide valuable insight from personal experience. The benefits of diversity are not limited to classes on international topics, as classes in literature often benefit from the insight provided from minority students as well. In American



Literature classes, the emphasis on African American writing often brings in perspectives from minority students that serve to make the experience of learning more relevant and insightful. In all these situations, a smaller class size enhances the benefits of a diverse classroom, as there is more room for people to speak up. Additionally, a professor who is willing to encourage discussion, especially among minorities within the classroom without putting excessive pressure on them, is another key factor in making the most out of a diverse classroom.

Outside the classroom, diversity functions in different ways. When students are not bound to a classroom, they seek the company of people with whom they feel the most comfortable. Many facets of diversity come into play here, well beyond culture and ethnicity, including such factors as age, personal interests, religion, style, and even music preferences. All these can determine the make up of certain groups. Of course, there are always students who seem to reside in groups composed of members from their own culture. Forming these types of groups helps them cope with being far from their countries and cultural origins, making them feel more at home. When people divide up into social groups based on common factors such as these, it is not a bad thing at all. A large, diverse environment such as Mason provides opportunities for nearly anybody to find similar people whose company they will enjoy. This is likely one of the main reasons why diversity is used as a selling point for the school. Essentially, Mason is suggesting that international or minority students will be able to find similar people with whom to associate. This is to not say that these minority students will only associate with people based on ethnicity or culture, but that they will have the ability to do so. Typical Mason students, regardless of being majority or minority, do not limit their social life based on their ethnic background. If they choose to live by such limitations, then they are not only in the wrong school, but in the wrong part of the world, as most of the Washington, D.C. area has a high degree of diversity as well as significant international importance.

Another selling point of diversity that is not solely aimed at minority students involves the school's image. The presence of diversity at Mason supports the notion that the school is more likely to be on the cutting edge rather than caught up in tradition. Globalization will be an increasingly important factor in business and technology into the 21st century. As a diverse school, Mason supports this trend by encourag-

ing students from other countries to enroll, in addition to helping these students succeed in the university despite the pressures that they may face as international students. As a relatively young school, Mason is still in the process of creating an image for itself. By projecting the theme of diversity to the public, the school is essentially creating an image that will increase in relevance as globalization continues to grow.

George Mason is doing a good job of reinforcing the university's image as a diverse school, but they are leaving it up to the public to interpret what diversity means. The roles of diversity in the classroom and in the social lives of students are not always fully discussed, and it is difficult to say whether it would be smart for the university to reflect these issues in their public relations initiatives. On the positive side, promoting and clarifying the benefits of diversity could reinforce the university's image of diversity even further. However, it is difficult to make promises based on diversity. The way that diversity actually functions within the school is up to the students themselves, rather than university policy, and the benefits of diversity to individual students cannot be guaranteed. As noted, for example, diversity benefits certain academic topics and environments more than others, so some students will naturally receive more intellectual benefits than others. Additionally, Mason is still largely a commuter school, and not every student has a social life on campus in which diversity will be a factor. Since the benefits of diversity cannot be promised by Mason as an institution, the institution is probably doing the right thing by promoting diversity in a rather vague manner. Yet the important thing is how Mason has taken the initiative to create and foster a diverse student body. It is one of the university's strongest assets.

Razia Tajuddin

## UNITING AND DIVIDING

I WAS DELIGHTED to learn through the George Mason University *Gazette*, that my university ranks as the most diverse university in the whole of the United States, according to the *Princeton Review*. Indeed, in a walk across campus, one hears the sound of people speak-

ing several different languages and can see different cultural and religious markers reflected in clothing, thus portraying a broad array of physical human diversity combined together at one institution. This is just the diversity seen, for diversity is not always manifested on a physical and visibly apparent level, but extends further into deep dimensions of human identity. The unseen diversity extends much further, into age, culture, sexuality, spirituality, class, and personality. With so many aspects of identity that people carry, what then can actually be said of diversity? Is it a concrete measure of student, faculty, and employee backgrounds at Mason, or is it a vague term used to generalize and divide people into niches of non-relatable “others”?

Diversity is one of those words that people generally understand, but that contains components and elements that are not wholly identifiable; there are no limits to diversity, as characteristics may be diminished as they become more commonplace, or new groups may be added to an intangible list as they become more apparent. Though diversity is neither stable nor static, we know that it exists. It is generally applauded and encouraged as a way to promote a salad bowl of human socialization whereby individuals and groups retain their own identity markers, but live and work in cohesion. In the case of Mason, the institution prides itself on diversity with a large number of international students and local diversity brought together and celebrated with various student organizations and campus activities. However, by emphasizing diversity are we celebrating these differences or reemphasizing these differences as ways to segment people?

My own opinions on diversity are mixed, and I find myself arguing both for and against the emphasis placed on diversity. On the one hand, it is not only important to give groups which are not in the mainstream a voice and presence, but also to encourage interaction so that the university community takes those interactions and awareness of human variation beyond the campus. This is especially important for students whose college experiences are as much social as they are academic, and who will carry with them their human comprehension into “the real world,” so to speak. It is important for students to not only see, but acknowledge that there is no human prototype. This human comprehension does not end at merely recognizing that another culture, religion, ethnicity, or perspective exists, but requires carrying onward those interactions and tools of being open to differences of identity and viewpoints that undergo constant re-negotiation.

The tools of being able to respond to differences are vitally important in a college and university atmosphere - more so than simply working on a group project with a conservative Muslim, taking part in a Hillel Shabbat dinner, attending a George Mason Pride Alliance meeting, or having conversations with older students who are well beyond the mainstream 20-something age bracket. All of those kinds of interactions are certainly ones to value. However, as the groups we categorize as being “diverse” are not static and may change as the context of the university atmosphere changes and time commands re-negotiations of “diversity,” the generic ability to continually learn about and from other groups is an indispensable tool to be used in new situations.

I very much enjoy the plurality of backgrounds at Mason and, overall, I feel that this extracurricular academic experience has been a positive one for me and for most students at George Mason University. Diversity is not just about seeing the differences, but also about seeing the similarities in an ostensibly distant other. From relaxing one’s nerves before a group presentation, to finding common sentiments in class discussions, to extracting meaning from difficult and dense readings, diversity takes a backseat to connecting on a personal level. It is important to be aware of the experiences and backgrounds of the social climate which makes up Mason, but it is certainly not apparent or needed at all times. Diversity is not just about noticing that which is different, but it is also about seeing human similarities.

I suppose one of my frustrations with the emphasis on diversity rests precisely on the external show of diversity, and the often superfluous need to highlight campus diversity. That goes back to the question asked earlier: by emphasizing diversity are we celebrating differences or just making these differences identifiable to further segregate people? While I understand that a certain amount of pride is necessary in minority representation which is undermined by majority groups, I worry that this may further perpetuate notions of difference, in a less than equal sense. This is where the circular argument of being tolerant of intolerance may surface, for example, in groups that wish to argue and legislate against homosexuality, or limited political expression, or limited voice within a categorical group.

Now nearing the end of my undergraduate experience at Mason, I recall being moderately involved in the Muslim Student Association, but never wholly feeling that I belonged, for even within a student association there are great degrees of variation. Diversity sometimes

becomes represented by icons of identity that are merely superficial markers serving as representations of that particular group. The vast range of Latino culture, for example, may be represented by a salsa dancing party or food fest. A close Lebanese Christian friend of mine was hesitant to join the Arab Student Association because of its majority Islamic orientation despite much cultural and religious diversity within the region. Some students may be hesitant to join other student organizations whose existence may be evidence of campus diversity, but do not do so because they do not fit certain prototypes, despite their cultural proficiency. This is not to say that room for change and expression does not exist, but that diversity may be marked solely by superficial attributes. Diversity exists beyond the food that people eat, the clothes that they wear, or their dances, music, gender, or sexuality. There are complexities within these categories and groups, and acknowledgement of diversity must extend beyond these broad generalizations. I understand that a certain amount of pride gives people an important feeling of cohesion, but it is important to recognize that these Venn-diagrams of circles of diversity are infinitely overlapping and constantly expanding.

Quite noticeably, George Mason is a highly diverse institution. It may be difficult at times to pinpoint the qualifiers of diversity, but it is something that seems to be mutually acknowledged by the social climate. I do worry that diversity is a superficial word that is attached to generalizations of groups and categories, sometimes segmenting people into groups under broad markers of identity. Diversity must not be paraded for show under superficial labels, but rather recognized by the students, faculty, and employees themselves—diversity reflected from within, not exploited from above. Diversity extends beyond skin color, religion, ethnicity, or the culturally stereotyped Chinese and Italian dishes served at Worlds Fare and La Vincita in the Johnson Center food court. While I am somewhat ambivalent on the emphasis of diversity at Mason, I think that there exists a great amount of room for one-on-one interaction where people discover the human side to diversity, as something more than an overarching classification of differences. It is my opinion that diversity varies more from individual to individual than from group to group, and while that may not be articulated by quantifiable statistics, it is an aspect of diversity that is still genuinely felt as a non-academic reward of higher education for many students.

Tisidra Jones

## REALITY AND THEORY

AS CHILDREN, even before we get to make our own choices as to who will be our friends, our choices are already narrowed down for us. I am saying this because although segregation is no longer legal today, school systems and classes are still separating students into group where students are placed with those who are more “similar” to them. This results in classes that are not all that diverse in the years prior to college. As a result of this, students then attend colleges already programmed to seek out those who are “similar” to them outside of the classroom. Although George Mason is credited with being the most diverse university in the country (this is quite true...on paper), it must be asked to what extent this statement is really true. When I walk into the Johnson Center, I can see that Mason is quite diverse, from the number of different languages I hear to the number of different styles, cultures, races, ethnicities, and religions that are present there. Whether there are kiosk booths set up to represent the different groups present on campus, or simply the different groups of people seated in the Johnson Center, diversity is not a question. What I do question is why, given such a diverse campus, are people for the most part seated with those of the same languages, styles, cultures, races, ethnicities, and religions? In addition, even within these groups are subgroups; for example the Black students can be broken down into the African Americans, the Caribbean students, and the Africans (who are then also broken down into their respective countries). I wanted to know if I was the only one that noticed these divisions among the students, so I decided to poll a number of students who came from various cultures, races, ethnicities, and religions by asking them: Under what circumstances do you interact with those similar to yourself, and when do you cross the lines of diversity?

Being comfortable in one's surroundings is important to people. Who enjoys feeling awkward and out of place? Through my poll I discovered that a majority of those polled longed to be with those more similar to them when they were in settings which were more personal, and which required people to interact at a level with more intense communication. A number of people responded that when they wanted to

just simply relax, and not feel bothered by the pressures they face on a daily basis from other groups, that is when they most longed to be with those most similar to them. Examples of these situations were: parties, when people were in large groups of people (to avoid feelings of awkwardness), and when they were in the Johnson Center. I began to wonder why this was the case, and thought about my own life and when I longed to be with those similar to myself. I discovered that when I am in one of the environments where I feel that I could most be “myself” is when I am with those who I feel will not pass judgment on me because we share similar lifestyles and past experiences. We studied this tendency (people seeking those with similar past experiences) in my sociology course which I took last semester, and that confirmed my assumptions about why people choose to be with those similar to them in these specific environments. The material which we studied addressed a number of differences among people, but it focused mostly on race. It stated that we as individuals are not born into this world aware of our differences, but by going through a number of different stages we then are made aware of them. As a result of our newfound awareness, we may then strive more to be with those who are similar to ourselves. With college being a time during which people often begin to “find” themselves and become more “aware” of who they are, some may find the answers to their questions through those who surround them.

This made me wonder why, then, wouldn't people want to be around those who are different from themselves to help them achieve a more rounded view of who they are and who they could be? In response to that question, I included a second part in the poll, asking when people function across the lines of diversity. The top responses to this question were: in organizations, in the classroom, and at work. I began to ask, if we are in college for the purpose of not solely attaining “book smarts” but also attaining the knowledge of how to work with and interact with those who share different points of view, then what better environments would there be to function across the lines of diversity than in the places where we will have to interact with those different from ourselves for the rest of our lives? The interaction which we encounter with those who are not similar to ourselves occurs in environments in which we don't have complete control of those with whom we interact. In addition, in these environments the product of whatever we are working on usually depends on the suc-

cess or failure of our interaction with those in our groups. At George Mason, the most diverse university in the country, the chances of being in a group with people who are not similar is quite high. As a result, students are faced with the choice of interacting with those in their group (striving for success as a unit, working together, and discussing any different points of views members of the group may have) or not interacting—and missing out on the wonderful opportunity to learn something that cannot be gained from a textbook. Interaction in these environments is thus quite beneficial to the college experience as a whole. In this respect, students are making George Mason University more than just the most diverse university based on numbers on a sheet of paper, but based in reality.

Is Mason truly as diverse in reality as it appears to be on paper? The answer to this question is that it simply depends on what aspect of our lives we are considering. If we are to analyze the personal lives of most of the individuals who live on campus, their circle of closest friends would include those who are most similar to themselves. In this respect, one could say that diversity is not all that present at Mason since everyone remains with those who are most like them. On the other hand, if someone were to visit a classroom in which students were doing group work (although in most cases these groups are not formed by student choice), one would find people of various races, ethnicities, religions, and overall backgrounds working together for a common goal as a team. This would paint the perfect picture of diversity to the visitor. College serves as a time for individuals to somewhat reprogram themselves, for themselves, by themselves, and honestly for the first time in their lives. Although outside of work, organizations, and the classroom, students may not initially choose to surround themselves with those who are different from them, the increased interaction which they encounter in the classrooms means that by the end of their college careers they may have a slightly more diverse group of friends and a more open mind towards those who are different from them. To me, this would be one of the most valuable things that a student would gain from the college experience.

When I walk through the Johnson Center on Monday morning, I know I will see the many diverse Mason students sectioned off into groups with those most similar to themselves. Yet I also believe that by Mason having such diverse classrooms and thus facilitating the interaction between people who would otherwise not even think of



approaching each other, there is the beginning of a blurring in the lines that separate these students from those who are not so similar to them.

Jade D. Wheeler

## WHAT IS DIVERSITY ANYWAY?

WHAT IS DIVERSITY anyway? Who gets to decide? Webster's Dictionary (1999) defines diverse as "different; unlike in characteristics; having various forms or qualities." It then defines diversity as "A difference; variety; unlikeness." I define diversity as an interactive *mélange*: if there is no melding and no interaction, then diversity is not present. The aforementioned is my opinion and my definition only. And many-a-time I place that definition on my university, considered to be one of the most diverse universities in the nation. As the university web site notes, for example, "George Mason is nationally recognized for the diversity among its student body so it is fitting that every year different nationalities are celebrated during International Week" But is Mason as diverse as it claims to be? Undergraduates, graduates, and professors at Mason seem to have similar ideas of what diversity is, yet have conflicting outlooks, and offer different solutions to problems that they feel the school ignores.

Interviewing a "diverse" selection of people, I asked them all the same opening question: What is your idea of diversity?

It's um...different races, cultures, and ideas. I'd say those are the main three. —Undergraduate, A.C.

I find it hard to talk about diversity...there are issues of oppression that make it hard. For example, instead of talking about racism, let's talk about how to become more diverse. —Graduate, D.R.

My definition of diversity is a wide mix of race, religion, socio-economic background, family life. Diversity is a mix of all different aspects as well as sharing those aspects in a common

area. To achieve diversity you must have differences which interact in some way. —Teaching Assistant, S.W.

My idea of diversity is race, religion, gender, and ethnic groups. I rarely consider class a “diversity issue.” It’s not that it doesn’t count—it just doesn’t come to my mind. —Professor, A.R.

Peoples’ interpretations went on in this same way, most identifying diversity as a variety, generally dealing in race or religion. One undergrad said that diversity reminds her of a song, “Variety is the spice of America....” Okay, so how do people then apply these definitions to our institution, George Mason? It seemed most of the undergrads stated, at first, that Mason was doing a wonderful job of incorporating diversity into the school’s environment. Then, as the interview continued, they began backtracking and changing their opinion. Most interesting is how the interviewees’ own heritage, class, major, and upbringing influenced what they identified as a “problem.”

One student, who would fit best in the Anglo-Saxon, middle-class category, suggested that international students should break from their comfort zone to bring about more interaction: “It’s a double-standard because they want to be here but they’re not interacting with us as much as they could be.” A student of mixed Chinese and Spanish heritage, but who is culturally Filipino, also spoke of a “melding” problem. “When you walk into the Johnson Center it’s like a [cultural] prison. There’s so much segregation within this ‘diverse’ place.... I’ve always made it a point to try and not stick with a [racial or social] clique, but I also like to be active within the Asian Pacific American group and its festivities.” Again, it seemed most of the undergrad students, from all different backgrounds, agreed that the interaction aspect is what is lacking at Mason.

An undergraduate student of Hispanic origin, and a graduate student of Anglo-Saxon background, both narrowed the topic down to their programs. One noted how the Theater program, though not very racially diverse, mixed constantly with whoever was present.

In my opinion, the Theater department is the most diverse [program] because ... we have so many people from different majors filtering in and out with every production and we all explore our creativity together. We have CS majors, English, Government, Anthro, everyone coming for their own reasons...

because they want to be a part of a community—one that they can't find elsewhere.

The graduate student noted the exact opposite in his program describing it as a “program that attracts a lot of the same [type of] people. There's a whole lot of White people and there's a whole lot of women—just if one were to take a quick look.” He then noted that once it got past the outer appearances, the program is, in fact, diverse in personal ways.

Two of the most eye-opening responses I received came from a graduate student and a professor. They were both very adamant about community outreach and difference in status and opinion coming into the university.

Mason defines success by “Did we get enough numbers?” They could take twenty people from different countries who all share similar thoughts and ideas and call it diverse—George Mason needs to get out there to different communities, finding people with different opinions and beliefs. Most of all, Mason needs to know who they're serving: is it serving national, international, Fairfax? Who!?

The professor notes:

This oh-so-diverse school cares only about international and not national. Mason tends to forget about the diversity we have right here at home. Do they care about enrolling single-moms into the university? What about poor White, Black, or Latino students? We need to get people involved through scholarships and outreach. Mason doesn't focus on [them] because it's not something to boast about. It's like they're only concerned with getting [a] foreign diplomat's kids to enroll here so we can check another country off on the list.

After gathering this plethora of comments, ideas, and concerns, I had to put my pen and paper down and let everything settle. I took in what my interviewees said. There were so many conflicting opinions that came from the same question and definition. I was shocked, and even disappointed by some. I was inspired by others. Could it be the size of Mason that adds to the problem? It is more difficult to have a sense of community when there are close to 30,000 students with three campuses...and it's a commuter school. Perhaps it's the majors that students from certain countries lean toward. Is it a cultural

thing? Maybe—and if so, is it then a fair and honest thing to say that Mason is more interested in only the international community or being able to say that we have representative students from over a hundred countries?

If so, the question I'd like to pose is, what good are these representatives if a large number of them stick mainly to themselves and also if American students do nothing to take advantage of the cultural and linguistic rainbow accessible to them? "Why not learn and borrow from others?" asks one student of Spanish and German heritage.

I guess for some people it's more comfortable to be with people of their own race or language...I expected [George Mason] to be an environment where everyone wants to get together. We have the ingredients, but they're not mixed together—they're still in their separate containers, their bowls, waiting to blend.

One professor suggests that it's great that Mason calls itself an "international community;" but there needs to be some acceptance that it's okay to be American too. "Those not of international heritage feel ostracized with all of the international clubs, even though they say anyone can join. The only other outlet is Greek Life or no life."

A recent Biology graduate says:

Even if people of different backgrounds aren't interacting or learning from one another I still believe that diversity happens because different people are being represented...just think that those people are not taking advantage of that diversity that is available to them...For me, being an Orientation Leader helped because it allowed me to not only educate, but also learn from incoming freshmen [concerning] the opportunity and advantage of having such a multi-cultural school like Mason.

A Psychology undergrad, when asked how much she interacts with a diverse crowd, replied that not only has she lived with international students, but she is in an organization with a "wide variety of people who come from different countries and experiences." Many of the more "artsy" people interviewed were not even aware that they mingled with such a mixed and culturally rich group of friends (in terms of race, religion, sexual orientation, etc) until I asked them

about their types of friends. The phrase used by each student at some point was “the UN.”

So, it seems that some programs and some students have no problem taking advantage of this wide array of students we have at our school—but what about the others? I asked my interviewees about some solutions to their proposed issues and problems: “I think it’s just fear—uncertainty,” says a music major, “We’re all at such an uncertain age, still trying to fit into our skin. I think as the world becomes ‘smaller’ and more ideas and beliefs, religions, and cultures become accepted and learned about, more people will learn to be comfortable in uncomfortable situations and learn to take risks.”

One graduate teaching assistant thinks that his program heads should “broaden their aesthetic and what is considered ‘artistic potential.’ The aesthetic right now is [American] upper-middle class...and there are a lot more socio-economic classes, a lot more languages, a lot more cultures and ideas that are not properly addressed. I think going in that direction will attract a more diverse group of prospective students to our program.”

The solution for a Theater major/Biology minor undergrad was:

Accept people from different socio-economic ranges and more out-of-state, not just out of country, students. Everyone from my Fairfax high school goes here...Also, the school itself needs to create a better community through better communication. Let’s collaborate! Get more students involved. Get the community involved...get a football team. That’d create school spirit.

A professor stated:

Not many people even know if we have an outreach program! George Mason needs to realize they should be serving the community and its people should feel comfortable that they can come and take classes. That’s diversity to me: [Let’s] go out to our community. Everything starts at home.

Soak it in. Reflect. It’s a lot to think about. All this diversity, all these different people, foods, languages, clothes.... What have we done with it? Exploited our students for numbers and reputation? Or welcomed international learners and educators with open arms, minds, and hearts? Students and representatives from George Mason obviously feel that there is a psychological battle going on. In the end, I

think that it is the students, not the administrators, who will take up the cause and embrace one another. We're all dealt a hand, it's all a matter of circumstance: so play. We as students have the power to manipulate what the higher-ups have thrown to us. Let us celebrate one another's diversity. Let us go out into our surrounding community. Let us create a community of our own on campus. In a positive way, these "different" people can band together to form a culturally diverse community. Let's build a community. Yes, diversity means "A difference; variety; unlikeness." Okay, I'll accept that. But what will you do with it?

## AFTERWORD

ONE THING THAT is paramount and striking in these essays is the range of perceptions about what it means to be diverse. Although there might be a general understanding of what a diverse individual, community, or region might be, the weight, importance, and meaning of diversity vary from writer to writer. Each essay has broken down this phenomenon of diversity as the authors have individually pulled out what diversity means to them. Their ways of doing this have included asking others about diversity, exploring their personal experience as a part of diversity, and critically questioning the validity of this concept at George Mason University.

Collectively, these essays hold great meaning. For instance, in a contextual setting, it is quite clear that George Mason offers exposure to a diversity that is unique in comparison to many other academic institutions. People on campus are, whether they are consciously aware of it or not, constantly exposed to many cultures, worldviews, and experiences. All these elements are found and somehow condensed into Fairfax, Virginia. This is clearly reflected in each of the essays contained in this volume. However, any attempt at deriving an accurate or concise definition of what diversity entails in a holistic sense is impossible. It is not something that can be quantified, as it undergoes an immense amount of re-definition. What these essays demonstrate is that diversity, whatever that even means, is indeed present and prevalent in the minds of all students, faculty, and staff. That diversity is not merely about the people represented at Mason but also their ideological conceptions of what diversity is.

Reading through these essays provides a sense of the feeling of diversity at Mason and how that diversity is perceived by those on campus. One aspect of that (as several essays note) is a comprehension of the effects of globalization and how people respond to it. To some extent, we are also able to see an example of how major cities throughout the United States are responding and feeling about the construction of this country through immigration from all over the world. That is one reason diversity has become hard to define. “Foreigners” are bringing their own culture, beliefs, folklore, political views, and ideas about diversity, cohabitation, and mutual respect.

In reading the essays, there are a few quotes that seem to jump off the page. Some are reminders of the darker side of the issues. For example, Jade Wheeler quotes one graduate student that there “are issues of oppression that make [talking about diversity] hard.” Another notes that “when you walk into the Johnson Center it’s like a [cultural] prison. There’s so much segregation within this ‘diverse’ place....” In her essay, Razia Tajuddin raises the question of whether by emphasizing diversity, we are “celebrating these differences or reemphasizing these differences as ways to segment people.”

The portrait seems at times a bleak one. We get a feeling from many of the writers that diversity, despite its high presence within George Mason, is not so easy to live with and that deception or misconception about diversity is frequent. It seems that diversity has brought some respect and acceptance from others, but not full assimilation. Students seem to integrate whatever stories and history are brought by others but without implicating themselves personally. So is diversity only about cohabiting?

There are countervailing, more positive thoughts. Often these are calls to action. One of Jade Wheeler’s respondents suggested: “Let’s collaborate! Get more students involved. Get the community involved...get a football team. That’d create school spirit.” And that same student who talked to her about oppression also suggested that “instead of talking about racism, let’s talk about how to become more diverse.” Those comments suggest Mason gives the opportunity to tolerate and accept others, to collaborate, and to help erase one of the world’s most intolerable abominations: racism.

Trying to make sense of this diversity, and its positive and negative sides, is not easy. Much of what we read in these essays, including our own, may have already been expected. On the other hand, many of the reflections were unexpected. So in the end we all gained individually by reading the thoughts of our peers on the subject. Mason is indeed diverse, but this diverseness is highly variable from person to person, very hard to define, perhaps cannot be collectively defined at all, and can sometimes create an uneasy feeling for students. It is also clear that while Mason may not be as diverse as people might expect in terms of actual social interaction, it is still a place where students are exposed to a vast assortment of people and cultures that they would probably not otherwise be exposed to. That exposure affects students and shapes their current and future perceptions of the world.



Perhaps overall, what sticks out most in talking about diversity—what seems to strike all the contributors—is that we are continually learning about this topic and how to act on what we learn. Crossing lines of difference is something that many people want to do, but even given the range at Mason, it is still something about which students often feel quite timid. How do you approach “different” people the first time (as Robin Chen Delos notes in the very first selection). It is also remarkable how many of the essays tackle the intangibility of “diversity.” Yet despite the difficulty in being able to approach others, the inability to actually define diversity, and the skepticism about diversity as a “marketing” strategy (particularly noted by John Thomas), it is still an aspect of campus life that everyone recognizes—even if they can’t quite put a finger on what it is. Overall, diversity seems less about being exposed to specific people and groups as about the “tools” (in all the varying definitions of the term) that help foster the willingness and ability to constantly remain open to difference.

Razia Tajuddin  
Tiffany Newsome  
Celine Kemp  
Alejandra Gonzalez-Arias  
Samuel Brase



In 2005, George Mason's Diversity Research Group began a series of pilot efforts examining the nature and implications of diversity at what is often described as one of the most diverse universities in the country. This volume provides the results of one of those pilot efforts, a series of free-form student essays. These essays present not simply raw data on student views, but rather the results of students' own analytic efforts to understand the nature and implications of diversity at their university. While the essays often include students' personal experiences, it is the students' analyses of those experiences that are central to this volume and that form the basis for understanding diversity as it is experienced by students on both the social and cognitive levels.

As a set, the essays suggest some common understandings about the wide range of diversity at Mason, how that diversity is socially organized, and how people function across diversity, particularly in classroom and organizational settings. The essays also provide more specific analysis of how diversity is used as an institutional goal (especially when linked to notions of globalization) and how different kinds of diversity intersect. Ethnicity, for example, emerges as a relatively neutral kind of diversity while issues of religion and nationality are often more sensitive and less bridgeable. Issues of ethnicity, religion, and nationality, however, are themselves often overshadowed by more elemental kinds of diversity, particularly age. These essays thus provide illustrations of the way contemporary university students are socially and cognitively navigating a diversity that is neither static nor unitary, but constantly evolving along multiple dimensions.

