

MY VISION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: PROVIDING PATHWAYS FOR INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS

BY MARIA REYES

Last October, I was sitting at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Office with my parents waiting for my mother to be called back in for her citizenship interview. While we were waiting, a couple with two little girls came in and sat in front of us, *Guatemalans*, I'm thinking. One of the girls appeared to be approximately 6 years old,



and the other no older than 3. As I'm sitting there, I could not stop staring at the hairdo of the 6-year-old. The elastic tie that had her hair in a mid-head ponytail was pink with two small, cream-colored flowers, a long black braid, and the same elastic band was used to tie the bottom of the braid. She looked the same as I did as a little girl—dark skinned, black-braided hair, and from pictures, even similar clothing. As I'm sitting there looking at this little girl, I could not help but wonder if she would be *guaranteed* the opportunity to go to college, if she would be able to “make it,” and if she would

be able to overcome barriers she might face because of her distinct ethnicity. What will it take for her to navigate the system?

My vision for higher education is one where students should not have to “navigate the system” or “figure it out.” That is because students should not have to assimilate into another culture that is not their own. They should not have to suppress their own identity. Higher education should be a place that provides a safe, physical space where students can celebrate their own culture and identity, and I believe a college union is just the place where different cultures can be celebrated. In 1998, labor organizer Myles Horton wrote in his autobiography *The Long Haul*, “You have to start where people are, because their growth is going to be from there, not from some abstraction or where you are or someone else is.” Administrators and faculty members need to understand that what their norm or reality is differs greatly from the reality of minority students. As an educator or student affairs practitioner, having this understanding is vital for being able to provide best practices.

Education should transform a person's sense of being, and should be one that motivates an individual to seek answers on how they can become their own, free individual. That little girl should have the opportunity, through education, to make her own discoveries and her own sound decisions, and what better place to accomplish this than at a college union. In their 2008 study in *Equity & Excellence in Education*, Margaret Zamudio Francisco Rios, and Angela Jaime argued that, “The potential for liberation always exists when students are encouraged to step outside of their individual world, to develop empathy, to think historically and to think critically.” Providing experiences and spaces for students to be in an environment where they are not afraid to express their own identity, where they do not feel oppressed by societal beliefs or expectations, is what I see as an ideal learning environment for higher education.

I believe creating this environment can be achieved by integration, but not by the process of combining, but by the process of changing the system internally. Looking inside the structure of the system will enable administrators to understand how the system benefits one demographic of students but is highly oppressing to another. Once administrators and educators understand their own privilege, they can more easily take action to help this marginalized group. In 1962, essayist James Baldwin published a letter to his nephew in *The Progressive*. Through his intimate words, Baldwin defines the process of integrations as forcing our brothers, with love and compassion, “to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.” We live in a world where white supremacy is an illness. It is a silent disease because society is not aware of how harmful it is or even of the nature of hegemonic power.

To be able to fully provide equitable, safe spaces that empower all students, the higher education

system needs to change. Higher education correlates with society in that we, as a society, are ignorant and become numb to oppression, hatred, and prejudice that most people of color face. Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, stated: "The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not 'marginals,' are not people living 'outside' society. They have always been 'inside'—inside the structure which made them 'beings for others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves.'" What will it take for individuals to realize that as time goes by, we become more and more inhumane by dehumanizing others, and through that process, ourselves too?

Oppression is a tricky concept because it goes multiple ways. It is an inhumane cycle that one is simply, without a choice, born into. The oppressor of course loses a sense of their humanity by this action, but the oppressed is also guilty of this action. The little girl will be oppressed by her distinct ethnicity, but due to that pain, she will most likely be oppressing her oppressor by not giving them the benefit of the doubt. It is ironic to realize that both sides cause some sort of dehumanization

worthless human being." However, Baldwin stated that there is no reason to adjust to all the whiteness and in reality, his nephew must accept his oppressors and do it with love. "You must accept them with love. For these innocent people have no hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it." This selfless act of genuine tolerance demonstrates compassion, understanding, and love that I believe can lead to a greater example of humanity. I believe actions like these will then affect education by providing a genuine, safe space for that little girl and students like her to achieve their own greatness.

My vision for higher education is one where the people at the "top," the people in administrative roles, who carry power, will be able to recognize they *have* the power. That they will be able to recognize they are privileged enough to be where they are and understand that there are a lot of individuals, too many actually, who are not privileged to "figure

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to take place. "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human," Freire wrote. Within education, or any context for that matter, I think realizing that the oppressor needs just as much love and understanding as the oppressed to come to a greater agreement is necessary, yet can be a difficult task. For the oppressed to understand that their actions are inappropriate, their worldview must shift and some sort of identity must be broken. I would not know how else one could reach true humanity if it were not for compassion, understanding, and love.

In his letter, Baldwin explained that you will be destroyed by believing what others say you are. He continues explaining to his nephew, "You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a

out the system" in time for the personal liberation that education can provide. By the position of power administrators hold and through their leadership, it is their responsibility to provide safe, equitable spaces for students. Horton explained: "Education is what happens to the other person, not what comes out of the mouth of the educator." That is the greater picture—providing the resources, assisting, and even challenging students to adapt their *own* pedagogy and philosophy, but unfortunately most people in power forget, or do not have, this vision. I believe it takes committed involvement (including internal healing) to keep this vision as a goal to reach an equitable environment in which individuals like that little girl will be able to succeed by providing their own definition of education.