

Diversity As Catalyst for Excellence

Thank you for the invitation to speak at the Department of Chemistry's Honors program. I am honored to be here and share in this special day with you all. Honors Days are important because they remind us to that we are striving to be the best – to be excellent.

I. Diversifying the faculty continues to be a major challenge.

In recent decades, universities have experienced growing racial and ethnic diversity, and women are now the majority of undergraduate and graduate students at many universities. As you know, we are not seeing the same gender and definitely not the same racial and ethnic growth in our faculty ranks.

We are fortunate that over the past few years the Department of Chemistry has made progress in increasing the diversity of its faculty and these efforts should be commended. And yet, my guess Dr. Feigerle, and others, would say diversifying the faculty continues to be a significant challenge. I say this because this continues to be the case for most research I institutions. This is especially true in the STEM disciplines.

And yet, the growing diversity on our campuses and in our communities has made the need to diversify the faculty more urgent. Most institutions still have a long way to go toward having a diverse faculty and the kind of diverse leadership needed to address the changing needs of our changing communities.

Demographic changes are creating a new reality that requires new ways of thinking about our future and a new kind of leadership. And that leadership is right here in this room.

Research shows that institutional efforts for increasing recruitment, retention, and achievement among underrepresented students in STEM fields are significant, but ultimately progress is slow¹. However, there has been more

¹ Whittaker, J. and Montgomery, B. 2012. Cultivating Diversity and Competency in STEM: Challenges and Remedies for Removing Virtual Barriers to Constructing Diversity Higher Education Communities of Success. *Journal of Undergraduate Neuroscience Education* 11(1): A44-A51. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3592737/>

progress and success at HBCUs. I think predominately white institutions should spend some time researching why that is. What can we learn from HBCUs that might be instructive to our recruitment and retention efforts of underrepresented student populations?

The research finding also suggests to me that it would be beneficial for us to get outside our institutional boundaries and begin to develop mutually beneficial collaborations with institutions that are having success in this area.

Let me share a few examples of STEM-oriented inter-institutional partnerships. Fisk University, a historically black college or university (HBCU), and Vanderbilt University, a research I institution, have a MS-to-PhD partnership that is aimed at increasing the participation of underrepresented physical science students. Indiana State University has a similar program with Jackson State University, an HBCU and California State University, Dominguez Hills, a Hispanic Serving Institution.

Our very own National Institute for Mathematical and Biological Synthesis or NIMBioS, has partnerships with five minority-serving institutions, including Fisk and Howard Universities. They have developed these partnerships to foster research collaborations and cultivate diverse researchers and scholars. A dominant factor of success identified in these post-baccalaureate “bridging” programs is extensive mentoring. Not just peer mentoring, but mentoring by faculty at both institutions.

I mention these “bridging” program examples for two reasons. The first reason is related to hiring.

These institutions use innovative programs to develop the talents of underrepresented students in their STEM PhD programs. We ought to leverage the investment of other institutions by having our eyes on these students for postdoctoral or assistant professor positions. Our first attempt at engaging them should not happen once we have a position available.

I liken effective recruitment of underrepresented faculty to that of athletic recruitment. Identify the most talented, underrepresented undergraduate and graduate students across the country and get your hands on them *early* and *often*. As my good colleague Dr. Ernest Brothers would say, “If you begin recruiting them when you have an opening, it is too late.” He’s absolute right.

The second reason I mention these “bridging” programs is that some of the techniques used to recruit, support, and engage underrepresented students are applicable for recruiting, supporting, and engaging underrepresented faculty.

II. Why is recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, and preparing diverse leaders, so important to our higher education institutions?

Our good work to diversify our students and faculty over the past decades is important and should not be overlooked. But, as I said previously, the need to diversify faculty now is even more important because we live in a global world with rapidly shifting demographics.

In such a world, a diverse faculty is not optional. We *cannot* meet the complex needs of a multicultural society if we don’t have diverse faculties and diverse academic and administrative leadership.

We cannot meet the needs of our communities if we aren’t preparing *all* students to *lead* those communities.

We cannot serve diverse students as teachers, mentors, and role models unless we have diverse faculties who bring diversity content and perspectives to their curricula, pedagogies, and research.

We cannot serve our communities as research institutions if we don’t have diverse scholars engaging in new kinds of inquiry that deepens and advances our understanding of the world, whose spaces and systems we all share.

And finally, I want to stress: we cannot achieve the *highest levels of academic excellence* without a diverse faculty.

Roberto Ibarra, associate professor and diversity scholar at the University of New Mexico, found in his research that diverse individuals “do not only bring ‘insider information’ about different cultures, ways of interacting, or values to the university. They also bring different, important and competitively relevant knowledge and perspectives about *how to actually do work*. They are critical to challenging assumptions about the status quo and to providing fresh approaches that can help to invigorate—and democratize—the academy.”

This is not a new notion. Actually, I argue that higher education institutions have long known the value of diversity. I make this argument because there is a long standing practice and philosophy in academe not to hire your own.

Most often doctoral graduates must leave the university where they received their PhD to obtain a professorship or post-doctoral position at another institution.

This long-standing tradition embodies the overall belief in academe that there is a need for diversity among theoretical backgrounds, methodologies, fields of study, research colleagues, mentors, and education and training.

The more approaches and techniques we have in the room, the better. It simply means there are more perspectives to approach and solve a problem. It also means there are diverse perspectives to the curriculum, pedagogies, and research.

So, why is there such resistance to the idea that diversity is a catalyst for excellence?

III. Diversity leads to innovation and innovation leads to results.

I believe there is resistance because many don't fundamentally believe that there are true benefits to diversity. And what I've said to the Chancellor is that we will not become a Top 25 institution or even a better institution without truly valuing and leveraging diversity.

I've stated many times that *we* cannot achieve the highest levels of excellence without a diverse faculty. Higher education institutions regarded as the most elite in this country demonstrate they believe this to be true too.

I say that because just this past March, Brown University announced that it was going to double its proportion of underrepresented minority faculty by 2025. Duke announced an initiative to double African American faculty in 1993. The University of Pennsylvania announced an aggressive faculty diversity initiative in 2011. My colleagues at Michigan, Washington, and Minnesota are working on initiatives to significantly increase the racial

diversity of faculty and to increase the percentages of women faculty in the STEM disciplines.

When we look at the landscape of institutional diversity and inclusion initiatives at the most prestigious research I institutions, it's clear their administrations already understand that diversity is a catalyst for excellence. When I worked at the University of Minnesota, the diversity office there had as their tagline, "Diversity Drives Discovery." We fundamentally believed that.

IV. Importance of retention.

As I mentioned at the start of my talk, the Department of Chemistry has had success in recruiting diverse faculty in the past several years. Recruiting diverse faculty is certainly a valuable and worthwhile first step. Access is important.

Equally as important is retaining the faculty you hire. But more than keep them, we need to make sure they *thrive* and have the opportunities to realize their full potential as scholars and university citizens.

I believe we do this through a four-prong approach.

First, we have to work to ensure that our environments are inclusive. This means we have a personal responsibility to be welcoming and inclusive to diverse faculty members and to ensure that our spaces are accessible.

An inclusive environment at the institutional level happens through policies, programming, and initiatives that educate our campus community. We need to educate our constituents about bias and discriminatory practices, and what to do if they believe they have experienced an act of bias. It is also necessary to have positive educational opportunities like the annual Collaborators for Change diversity summit.

My inaugural Collaborators for Change diversity summit was held last September and focused on best practices. This year's summit is open to all faculty and staff and will be held on September 25, 2015. In fact, the call for proposals is now open on my website.

The **second** way we keep our diverse talent is by supporting their journey for success. We need to actively nurture their professional growth by making sure they are connected to informed faculty mentors inside and outside the department. Some argue that even more important than hiring diverse faculty is the mentoring support programs necessary to retain tenure-track faculty.² It is through these mentoring relationships that many new faculty learn the “unwritten rules” of a department or institution and how to successfully negotiate within the institution.

It is important that we also make sure new faculty are aware of institutional resources available to them. For example, the Office of Research and Engagement has workshops to help with grant writing, securing external funding, and producing break through research. In addition, the Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center has a variety of workshops and other supportive programs to assist faculty in the classroom.

A **third** component to retention is developing a sense of belonging. What I mean by this is assisting faculty to get connected to a community, communities, or organizations that are important to them. For some, the Faculty Pub the Provost’s office coordinates is sufficient. For others, it may be joining a community of scholars comprised of faculty across the campus where they can do interdisciplinary work together. Or, it may be a connection to one of the identity-based Chancellor’s commissions that are connected to my office. The point is that if any of us feel connected we are more likely to stay.

And **lastly**, we need to provide new faculty with guidance and ongoing feedback to insure they are retainable, will be promoted, and ultimately receive tenure. If we have a revolving door of women faculty and faculty of color, we will never obtain the increases espoused by campus leadership.

V. Hope because of commitment of Chancellor, Provost, and Deans.

I’d like to end by sharing some reasons I’m hopeful that diversity and inclusion will be advanced at UT.

² Taylor, O., Apprey, C. B., Hill, G., McGrann, L., and Wang, J. (2010). Diversifying the Faculty. *Peer Review* Vol. 12, No. 3. <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/diversifying-faculty>.

I'm hopeful because we have seen substantial movement in the ranks of senior leadership. The number of women as well as the number of African Americans at the assistant vice chancellor, associate vice chancellor and vice chancellor levels is unprecedented.

I'm hopeful because our deans are making changes to their administrative structure to further advance diversity and inclusion in their areas.

I'm hopeful because we have a commitment that there will be gender-neutral, family-style bathrooms in all newly constructed and public campus areas frequented by students, faculty, and staff. This is a major milestone. We are now much more inclusive and welcoming to persons who do not identify as strictly male or female, as well as persons with disabilities.

Another reason for hope is the STRIDE@UT initiative. STRIDE@UT is a faculty-led committee to revitalize our university's efforts to hire and retain a diverse faculty. This group conducts research on bias and diversity, and then uses peer-to-peer instruction to educate our campus community about implicit bias in the recruitment and hiring process.

STRIDE@UT has given several presentations across campus, but in Fall 2014 they gave their presentation at the annual Academic Leadership Retreat for campus deans, directors, and department heads. Educating our campus leaders about implicit bias in hiring processes will help us move the needle towards our goal of hiring diverse, stellar faculty.

I'm hopeful that over time the efforts of STRIDE@UT, combined with that of campus administration, academic deans, and department heads will galvanize our efforts to recruit, hire, and retain a more diverse faculty.

VI. Hope because students are pushing and leading the way.

And finally, there is reason for even more hope because now more than ever students are pushing and leading the way.

Last Saturday, the student caucus of the Chancellor's Commission for Women hosted a Women in STEM Symposium.

The symposium was a free, full-day professional conference. I'm hopeful that this will become an annual event that will celebrate the many contributions women are making to our STEM disciplines, and that the event will also serve a reminder that there is still work to be done.

Also in the STEM area, women graduate students in the department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science formed Systers, spelled S-Y-S-T-E-R-S. This group focuses on attracting, retaining, mentoring, and graduating women in their department.

VII. Conclusion

I conclude by saying I'm hopeful because I was invited to speak at this event. Extending the invitation suggests that the chair and others in the department believe that diversity can catalyze our efforts to be a more excellent institution. I hope that I have given you some things to think critically about.

I leave you today with two challenges:

1. The first, ask yourself what one thing can you do to make the department more accessible, welcoming, and inclusive.
2. The second, actively engage diverse graduate students and faculty members across the country. Show them that our institution is working to be more welcoming and inclusive and ask them to consider how they might be a part of helping your department and our institution to be more excellent.

Thank you for your time today.