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## Playing the Diversity Game

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Near the end of the 2006 winter semester Grand Valley experienced what has been described as “acts of intolerance.” A same sex couple was spat upon walking the campus sidewalks, racially motivated threats of violence were shoved under Black and Hispanic students’ doors, and racial slurs painted the walls of Winter and Secchia Hall. These actions echoed a perceived hateful and divided student body whose insensitivity and insecurity made even learning together impossible. As a Multicultural Assistant (MA) I believed Grand Valley students’ behavior was a result of my failure. There were sixteen of us, student leaders hired through Grand Valley’s Housing and Residence Life. Our responsibility was to support the diverse student culture and create an environment dedicated to tolerance, understanding and compassion. But watching the pandemonium of acts of intolerance, we felt like failures. As a group, our meetings became argumentative and heated. One of our superiors even told us “you have not done your jobs as student leaders.”

While I and my superiors knew that one person, or one small group of people could not be held responsible for the behavior of an entire university community, it was difficult to refrain from blaming ourselves. We had been hired believing we would make a difference. My co-workers and I joined the Multicultural Assistant (MA) program full of the idealistic attitude Housing and Residence Life (HRL) presented. We could save the world. If not the world, at least Grand Valley. We organized and planned events that we felt confident would challenge the preconceived beliefs of race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, gender and nationality of our residents. We posted bulletin boards around Grand Valley’s living centers, promoted upcoming multicultural events and made a point of getting to know each resident during orientation. However, in the weeks following the 17 recorded acts of intolerance, our work seemed insignificant.

In response, students marched on Grand Valley’s administration calling for action and answers. They wanted a solution, yet were unable to provide suggestions. Even the professionals in President Mark Murray’s administration and the Office of Multicultural Affairs were at a loss for how to handle the issue. While Grand Valley updated the protocol for reporting biased acts and investigated each incident thoroughly, their actions failed to quench the students’ emotional and confused rage. As MAs our job was to proactively fight against intolerance using education and compassion. Among GVSU students, we had the most opportunity to teach our peers about the benefits of diversity. And while HRL taught us the value of multiculturalism, they did not show us *how* to teach.

As Multicultural Assistants and Residence Assistants (RA) we underwent two weeks of training prior to the school year. During this time we met as smaller staffs to meet one another intimately. Each MA and RA was assigned a living area where he or she lived and worked. I was the MA for Grand Valley Apartments, a community holding twelve separate buildings, two being sororities and two being housing for families and children, with twelve apartments in each building. While my staff of four RAs was responsible for three buildings each (approximately 120 students), I felt responsible for the emotional well being and behavior of over 450 students. As an MA my role was to educate the residents in my area and to program events with the other sixteen MAs for all Grand Valley students. We mediated roommate conflicts that arose from differences in race, sexual orientation and ability and also organized open discussions that dealt with sensitive diversity topics. Despite our increased responsibilities and the sensitivity of these issues, we received little additional training. In fact, our training consisted of celebrating and discussing the virtues of multiculturalism. We made word diagrams (D – diverse, diversity... , I – intelligence, international, intersexed, etc...) and played games defining terms such as ageism, sexism and ability. While entertaining, these activities did not teach us how to show our residents the true value of diversity. These techniques failed to fight intolerance at its core and only attracted those students who already valued multiculturalism and, frankly, had some time to kill.

The philosophy of the MA program was to give our residents information relating to diversity and encourage those residents to research and discuss the value of that information on their own time. These exercises would create an accepting and informed student body. Instead, students were unable to see how our games affected their daily interactions. We would handle the same questions “Who cares if I say ‘that’s so gay’ if a gay person isn’t around?” or “Everyone says ‘retarded’ who cares if I say it too?” Each one of us handled these questions in a different way, often yielding the same results, but for different reasons. While we were improving behavior it became apparent that we disagreed on what multiculturalism was. Some believed multiculturalism was various cultures living openly, celebrating their differences, while others believed our goal was to teach residents that we are all inherently the same. Some believed multiculturalism was achieved by strict rules, while others trusted in the power of open conversation. Our job was to educate our residents thus eradicating racism and hatred. However, Housing and Residence Life failed to define what they meant by multiculturalism. Our mission was simple, our tools confounding.

After the acts of intolerance, Grand Valley’s student body polarized. Students led marches and sit-ins challenging the administration to do

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more. Other students felt their protesting peers were overreacting and damaging Grand Valley's reputation. This debate filled the pages of the *Lanthorn* for weeks and made state wide news programs. As MAs we were drained and our meetings had never before been so unproductive. We argued about techniques we should have used to prevent these acts and lost sight completely of how to handle our current situation. Our elemental problem was that we had all interpreted diversity in different ways. Our picture of a multicultural Grand Valley varied, and we could not agree on where we were headed or what exactly we were fighting for. Multiculturalism was an idea, a concept that everyone knew existed, but failed to articulate. Since no one could define or describe our goal of a peaceful, multicultural utopia, the pursuit of diversity was muddled, debated and never deciphered.

Looking back now months later, I see our failure as student leaders stems from a fundamentally flawed Multicultural Assistant program. This program is in turn flawed due to a failure to adequately articulate the concept of multiculturalism. Most view multiculturalism as an integration of cultures. Housing integrates people of different cultures and upbringings together in one room and living area. But instead of simply integrating minorities into the host culture, like integration has worked historically, multiculturalism encourages us to hold onto and celebrate our cultural identities. Retaining our racial and cultural identities while integrating together will allow us to learn from each other's perspectives and beliefs. This is, however, my personal belief of what multiculturalism is and should be. As MAs each one of us had a slightly different definition of multiculturalism. Yet our superiors and the administration operated on the belief we had a consistent vision. Conflict arose when HRL began striving towards something they believed in but could not agree upon.

As a group we could not achieve our ultimate multicultural goals because we had not agreed on what multiculturalism meant. Our lack of a fundamental definition of multiculturalism, however, was only a part of the problem. Since we could not establish what we were working towards, we could not answer 'how' to work towards it. How do we apply the philosophy of multiculturalism at Grand Valley? What does our plan look like? The MA program did not teach us how to practically reach our goals. Our only tool was our passion for our vision of a more peaceful and diverse Grand Valley.

Diversity's difficult application draws additional attention to the recent debate over Affirmative Action (AA). Most would agree that the eradication of AA does not directly eradicate diversity. AA was simply a tool to achieve multiculturalism. What the abolishment of AA challenges us, as an institution of higher learning, to do is to redefine, or better, to define our pursuit of diversity. Multiculturalism is a social philosophy that has

no plan and no standard goal. If we can create a clear definition we can unite our students and student leaders.

The intent of the Multicultural Assistant program is commendable, but its work is far from finished. What does multiculturalism mean for Grand Valley? What does our diverse environment look like? What are we trying to achieve with diversity? As a former MA I feel I should understand these questions more than most, but I don't. It is this lack of fundamental understanding that makes me ill-equipped to deal with acts of intolerance, ignorance and hate motivated behavior.