

Opportunity, Diversity, and Community

The ideas of opportunity, diversity, and community seem to me to be parts of the same issue. The College of Science is one of the fundamental pieces of Oregon's Land Grant University. We are all, as members of that University, charged to serve the citizens of Oregon who support us, the students who come to us for their education, and the people of the nation who underwrite our scientific enterprise. Sometimes that service is about education in the classroom, sometimes it is about interactions in the field or the community, and sometimes it is about research and investigation. In each case, however, we are not charged with serving a particular part of the public, based on religious, political, or cultural interests. We are charged with serving the public at large.

Opportunity lies at the heart of being effective in discharging our job. Everyone who joins OSU whether as student, faculty member, or staff, needs the opportunity to be successful. If *every* student in our classrooms has the chance to succeed academically, if *every* member of the faculty and staff can achieve their professional potential in the College, and if *any* student who wants to pursue a career in science or mathematics knows that our programs will work for them, we will be a long way towards serving Oregon and the nation effectively.

Note that creating equal opportunities for success does not mean that everyone will succeed. People still have to be responsible, in the end, for their own success. They should, however, have the same chance to pursue that success.

Creating equal opportunities for everyone in our community is not something that we can do passively. I have discovered over time in my classrooms that I cannot simply treat everyone in the same way and assume that approach results in everyone having the same opportunity to succeed in my class. An expectation that everyone in a class engage in Socratic debate may not be realistic in a classroom with students from many different cultural backgrounds. Students who are the first in their families to attend college may arrive in our classrooms with very different understandings of our expectations than students from families with long histories of higher education. The assignment of a last minute, 10 page extra credit paper has different consequences for a student who has to work 25 hours a week and one on full financial aid. Similar examples could be found for mentoring junior faculty or provided career development for members of our staff. I am not suggesting that we need to have shifting standards for accomplishment. I am suggesting that we need to actively consider and learn how to truly create equitable opportunity for our students, colleagues, and employees.

If opportunity is at the heart of our mission, then diversity in our ideas and demographics is an essential part of creating opportunity. Diversity of ideas is the very center of what a university is about. The ability to discuss, debate, and consider ideas that conflict is essential to all of our disciplines. Accepting such debates is easy when they are about mathematics, rocks, or astronomy. They become more difficult when the subjects are religion, economics, or public policy. In every case, we must be able to pursue debate while recognizing there is a boundary between speech that is about the free and open exploration of ideas and speech whose intent is to hurt a specific person or group. It is not always easy to decide where that boundary is. Appreciating that such boundaries exist and that they are different for different people is one of the points of encouraging diversity in ideas.

Demographic diversity is a piece of this. It is hard to have the opportunity for full and open debate if some voices and perspectives are entirely missing from the stage. The demographics of many disciplines in science and mathematics, including those in our College, would certainly suggest that we might not be providing equal opportunity to every member of our communities. The demographics of our student population do not reflect those of the state of Oregon. The percentage of women earning doctorates in most of our disciplines is less than the number obtaining B.S. degrees. The percentages of women and people of color at the rank of full professor remain far different than the pool of university graduates, despite decades of attention. The reasons for these trends are complex, and include educational, social, and economic factors. However, there is a very substantial (and growing) body of research that point to what we do in our classrooms and how we do it as factors that contribute to those demographic inconsistencies. If we are serious about creating opportunity for our students we need to be willing to examine the reasons for demographic patterns and to consider changes that might improve those patterns.

The sense of community on campus and in each of our units is a good measure of whether we are in fact a welcoming and diverse organization. Our community in Corvallis is unlikely to ever have the demographic diversity of Houston, San Diego, Boston, or North Carolina, to pick places I have worked. Those places have populations that are diverse in quite different ways, as a result of their histories, locations, and economies. Our goal is not to mimic how another places looks, but to create a community where we are, in fact not rhetoric, creating equal opportunity for all members of our community. If everyone can succeed here, if everyone is comfortable exploring what they know and do not know, if our students learn here what it is like to work and live in a fluid, complex, and multi-cultural world, we will have fulfilled our obligation and created something very valuable for the people of Oregon.

So, we need to ask ourselves if the opportunities available to students, faculty and staff are truly equitable. If students find their opportunities limited because they do not have mentors and role models they identify with, if faculty cannot advance because of real or perceived barriers based on who they are not what they do, if staff members are uncomfortable in the work environment because of their religious beliefs, if students chose not to come to OSU for science programs because they don't think they will be welcomed, if students struggle in the classroom because they aren't familiar with the expectations or models the instructor takes for granted, the College has failed at the central part of our mission. I know that there are occasions where each of these things is true, now, in our College. That suggests to me not that we are unaware or unconcerned about the issues of opportunity, diversity and community, but that there are things we can understand better and learn to do better. My request for volunteers to work on an assessment of diversity and community in the College is a first step towards improved understanding and action.

I note on the next page for your information the mission and values that the members of the College adopted some time ago.

Mission:

The College of Science of Oregon State University exists to create, share, preserve, and apply knowledge. Through these pursuits, the College prepares individuals for success; benefits the state, nation, and the world through the intellectual and economic contributions of those individuals; and improves the quality of life of individuals and their communities through research and its resultant benefits. The mission of the College is

- To provide comprehensive undergraduate educational programs for future scientists and science educators;
- To teach basic scientific and mathematical principles to all OSU undergraduates to help them become productive and informed citizens;
- To provide outstanding graduate education in all COS programs;
- To engage in basic and applied research to advance the frontiers of scientific and technical knowledge, and to preserve and advance the health, environment, and economic welfare of the citizens of Oregon and the nation;
- To improve the quality of education and technical training in science and mathematics by working with community colleges, schools, and state and regional agencies.

The Principles of the College of Science

The members of the College affirm the following principles and strive to be guided by them in all of our work.

Openness - The open and honest exchange of information and ideas is a foundation of a healthy institution. We seek to build an atmosphere of trust and a sense of partnership by clear communication of expectations, policies, and decisions, and by encouraging debate within a framework of clear decision-making authority.

Community- The University is a community, and each part--from the individual to the whole---contributes to building and strengthening that community. Even when conflicts exist, we will cooperate to make decisions for the common good.

Flexibility - Change is not only inevitable but is desirable. We seek to place an emphasis on goals rather than on structures or programs, and to cultivate an openness to change at all levels.

Respect - All people – the general public, students, staff, faculty, and administrators, are valuable in their own right and will be treated with respect.

Patience - We seek to nurture an atmosphere of acceptance and goodwill recognizing that advances are built equally on successes and failures and how one responds to both.

Responsibility - Each person is responsible for making their own choices and is accountable for the consequences of their choices and actions.