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**“Response to Professor Morain’s Founder’s Day Address”**

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Good afternoon. I want to thank the Alumni Association for allowing me this opportunity to speak. I also want to thank the University of Georgia, for the opportunities for academic and personal enrichment it has provided me for the past four years.

I believe that a university education is most valuable for the very unique intellectual and personal engagement it encourages. The best universities make this type of engagement, on the part of both faculty and students, their highest priority. The value of a diverse campus is that this engagement can occur between people of various backgrounds and unique perspectives. A University committed to internationalism, study abroad programs, and multicultural awareness can offer its students fantastic opportunities to appreciate other cultures and their “world views.” That’s why we’re here as students, after all – to be intellectually challenged, but also to interact with one another, to learn from one another, and to appreciate different perspectives in order to enrich our own.

I have carefully chosen the word “appreciate.” I could have said, as countless others have before, that we need to *understand* other cultures and the “world views” under which they function. But I feel that when dissecting such sensitive issues as multiculturalism, usage of the word “understand” could be interpreted by some as naïve. The interesting truth is that we, as human beings, reserve the privilege of *not* being fully understood. I could read an entire library of African-American studies. I could discuss with women for an entire lifetime the special challenges women face in the world. Yet, the second I approach an African-American friend and tell her, “Now I understand your experience. I know what it’s like to be African-American,” or “I understand what it’s like to be a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” I have committed an offense by being presumptuous. I am, and always will be, an outsider to those experiences. The most I can hope to do is appreciate their perspectives and integrate them with my own. We must not be too cavalier in presuming we know something about a person because we “understand” the experience of their culture.

So if our charge is to appreciate other cultures and their “world views,” how do we achieve it

here at the University of Georgia? Dr. Morain reviewed the statistics: 800 minority students out of 5,175 incoming freshmen. Maybe it sounds better to say 15% of the incoming class can claim minority status. These are numbers that are thrown about in administrative board rooms. Sometimes they are received with high-fives and congratulations for a job well done. Other times, the message is more sobering: “We can do better.” Either way, the focus is in the wrong place. While efforts to increase the number of minority students on campus should not be abandoned, we must not forget that the *presence* of minority students does not imply the *participation* of minority students. Dr. Morain described the results of a survey indicating that UGA students feel they are not interacting enough with this 15%. Has the diversity become too politicized, to the point that numbers are the most important thing? I hope one day those numbers will be something we, as a university community, can feel secure about. I hope that one day that minority percentage is doubled. But I remind you, an active and engaged 15% is more productive and holds more educational value than an isolated 30%.

Indeed, the value of a diverse student body is the opportunity it provides for productive interactions between people who have different perspectives, different backgrounds, different beliefs and assumptions and practices. What good is diversity if these interactions are not taking place, as the survey results seem to indicate? Here on campus, our classrooms must become an arena for these interactions. In order for that to happen, student attitudes (both from the majority and the minority) must change.

Unlike the hornet-like “wedge” of administrators that Dr. Morain described cornering her African-American colleague in 1968, we need not swarm in a bee-line to shake hands with our minority classmates and professors and buzz around them with an aura of hopeless goodwill. Let’s instead keep an open mind to *all* those around us. Learn from every person. Allow other people to learn from you.

Somewhere along the way, diversity and minority became interchangeable. Sometimes it’s easy to think that in order to appreciate diversity, we must seek the minority. As the son of two Cuban immigrants, I have been assigned the minority demographic label of “Hispanic student.” Once, in a discussion about medical school admissions, my friend, who also hopes to become a physician, told me, “Daniel, you’re lucky. You can play the ‘Hispanic card.’” Asked to clarify, he explained that admissions committees may look more favorably on minority students that will increase the multicultural percentage the school can advertise.

This idea has been very troubling to me. My heritage is something I’m proud of, something I hold close to my heart. When I go home, I count myself lucky that I was raised on Cuban games and music. My favorite Cuban meal is *congri*, a mixture of rice and beans and bacon and spices. My mouth waters when I think about it. Of course, very little of this is conveyed in the very professional demographic title of “Hispanic student,” and furthermore, I can see no reason that my classification as “Hispanic” would make me a better physician than my friend. I believe my academic strengths lie in my capacity for intellectual engagement, and I will be a compassionate and competent physician because of my interest in *personal* engagement. I feel quite

uncomfortable at the thought of playing ‘the Hispanic card,’ and I would much rather play ‘the *student* card.’

We should not become preoccupied with percentages and demographic classifications in seeking diversity. The truth is, as Dr. Morain has stated, we *do* all share human commonalities. One of those commonalities, ironically, is difference. Individuality. We each have our own background, our own set of experiences that has shaped us. We each have something special for another person to appreciate and learn from.

Courses designated by the University as ‘multicultural’ should not be the only ones that allow for valuable communication between people of different backgrounds. Last spring, as a participant in the Security Leadership Practicum run by UGA’s Center for International Trade and Security, I met twice a week with a diverse group of students to discuss issues related to homeland security, weapons nonproliferation, and bioterrorism. The myriad perspectives offered in those sessions were fabulous – yes, we had different ethnic groups represented – Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American. But we also had a different type of diversity at work. There were several people trained as paramedic first responders, who were able to offer insight when we ran a drill to simulate a biological weapon attack. We had a detective from the University Police, who spoke from the law enforcement angle. We had pre-law students who researched legal approaches to counter-terrorism and scientists who offered perspective on the spread of toxins. We all walked away from that experience better educated for having engaged one another to appreciate the things that made our group diverse.

Sometimes the best arena for appreciation of diversity is outside the classroom. For the past year, I have conducted research in a cellular biology laboratory on campus. I have the privilege of working with a group of brilliant scientists, but more importantly, a group of diverse individuals who each approaches science and life in his or her own way. In between experiments, I have had insightful conversations with Caucasian and Asian-American mentors, peers from Georgia, Kentucky, and Idaho, and international students from Korea.

International study abroad programs, for which UGA ranks 12th nationally, offer another great venue for valuable engagement. After my sophomore year, I spent a summer studying in Innsbruck, Austria. I had wonderful professors who taught me a great deal, but it was understood that the bulk of our education would take place in the town of Innsbruck or on the weekend trips to Vienna or Germany or Italy. It was then that I was able to engage Europeans in intellectual discussions about American foreign policy, about customs and cultures, about their practices, perspectives, and products. I still keep in touch with Austrian friends I made.

And sometimes the site of these valuable interactions with different people is even further removed from the classrooms of our beautiful Athens, Georgia. This summer, using University scholarships, I will travel to southwest Uganda to assist in medical relief work for the indigenous Batwa population. The practices, perspectives, and products of the Batwa are far removed from our own, and I look forward to learning a great deal from these people.

But let me reiterate that these important interactions of people from different backgrounds *can and must* take place here on UGA's campus. Our classrooms, already gaining a national reputation as an arena for superb *academic* engagement, are an obvious place to take advantage of the *interpersonal* engagement that makes our diversity so valuable. University class sizes should decrease, and discussion should supplement lectures in every discipline, at every level, to allow for students to learn from students, as Dr. Morain observed in her own 'cross-cultural understanding' class. If it is the students' responsibility to open and engage themselves with peers, it is the professors' responsibility to foster an atmosphere that maximizes the potential for students to appreciate and learn from one another. Thankfully, the University of Georgia has a stellar faculty that can *itself* offer invaluable perspectives in every class meeting and every interaction with students.

As our efforts succeed in making this a more diverse campus, let us show that we are a University that knows how to *take advantage* of diversity. Let us show that we are engaging one another, appreciating our differences, and learning from one another's experiences. If we are building a new learning environment, let us show that it is an environment that fosters interactions and discussions, an environment marked not only by goodwill but also by a passion for learning and an interest in those around us.

We, as students, are more *knowledgeable* when we leave here because of the textbooks we've read and the lectures we've heard. We are better *educated*, however, thanks to the people we meet and engage along the way.

Thank you.