

I love my hometown. It's a small, quiet place in central Illinois and is home to Western Illinois University (WIU). Eighty-eight percent of Macomb's residents are white. Most of those who don't work for the university are employed by the hospital, the ball bearing manufacturer, or are self-employed in agriculture. Macomb is not a diverse town and the nearest city is hours away, but WIU's commitment to promoting diversity opened up a window to the wider world for residents like me. As a child, I always looked forward to the annual university-sponsored International Bazaar, where I could travel the world in one colorful ballroom, tasting different foods, admiring unfamiliar flags and traditional dress, smelling a mixture of perfumes and spices, dancing to world music, and running around with other children. In high school, I began helping my mother cook for the Soul Food dinner -- part of WIU's celebration of Black History Month. Through a commitment to diversity in its hiring practices, WIU also gave me the opportunity to see intelligent men and women from all around the world lead successful academic careers. One of those faculty members, from Somalia, was my neighbor and the father of my classmate, with whom I often swapped lunches - each of us excited to try something new. Despite growing up in a small, rural town, I was given opportunities to observe and interact with people of different skin tones, physical abilities, sexualities, religions, and ideas. WIU inspired in me an interest in other cultures and encouraged me to celebrate differences. I have seen first-hand that a learning institution's dedication to expanding and investing in diversity can significantly impact faculty, students, prospective students, and staff as well as the surrounding community it serves.

I can write about my hometown in an idyllic way because to me, it was. I never had to face discrimination or disadvantage, but as I grew older, I began to see and experience the dangers of uniformity and ignorance. It was sometime in high school that my family took a trip to rural Alabama with my mother's sister and her family. Outside a small town shop, a man stopped my aunt and admonished her for having mixed race children. If she wanted to marry a black man, he said, that was her choice, but she should not have brought mixed children into this world. My uncle chose not to engage with the man and quickly shooed our family down the road, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was shocked that a person could hold such views, which I had thought to be extinct. I was even more shocked that my aunt, uncle, and cousins were not showing signs of surprise. Clearly, this was not a new experience for them. I realized, then, how ugly the world can be when we do not celebrate diversity.

In college, I sought out opportunities to work with diverse populations and soon discovered my passion. After mentoring first graders through my university's Grade-School Achievement Program and joining the local Habitat for Humanity chapter, I decided to spend a summer volunteering for a refugee settlement program through Lutheran Services of Iowa in Des Moines. In those couple of months, I worked with people from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. I drank tea and held babies while waiting for families to get ready, I saw children learn English and teach their parents, I learned that prayer time cannot be interrupted or hurried, and I witnessed the humility with which settled immigrants and refugees invited new arrivals into their communities and homes. Unlike the International Bazaar I had been to so many times, this opportunity gave me a glimpse of everyday life around the world. It

wasn't all bright colors and dances. Getting to know so many individuals on a more personal level showed me some of the daily challenges they faced.

The children and families I worked with inspired my undergraduate honors thesis about labor market outcomes for the children of immigrants. I began to study development economics -- especially focusing on distributional effects on marginalized groups. In graduate school, I continued to study development economics. As I learned more about how the world worked and became more sensitive to various forms of discrimination, I realized that discrimination can be systemic and passive in our society. Rather than focusing on individuals alone, I learned to think about the role of history and policies. I noticed, for example, that the proportion of minorities was higher in the introductory classes I taught than in my advanced courses. The ratio of women also shrank as the course numbers climbed. The only exception to the rule, in my classroom, was the development economics course I offered in the fall of 2016. In the class of 14, 28% were women and the students represented 8 different countries. Students shared their opinions and experiences as they related to course content, which stimulated more ideas and understanding. We discussed the lasting role of colonialism around the world and acknowledged that much of the academic sources pertaining to development economics come from developed parts of the world. At times, we focused on the role of women and the effect policies can have on indigenous populations. Diversity in this class, especially, improved our exchange of ideas and led to a deeper understanding of the material.

I strive to make all of my economics courses inclusive despite the lack of student diversity. Over several semesters of offering a statistics course, I have analyzed in lecture the number of police shootings by race and the possible existence of gender and motherhood wage gaps. I write exams using the world's most popular names rather than ones that come to my mind. I encourage eligible students to register with the Disability Services Office and have enjoyed working with that team to allow students the appropriate time and resources needed to benefit from lecture and to complete exams and quizzes. I strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust so that students are willing to talk to me about personal challenges. Encouraging diversity in the classroom is important for those enrolled and those thinking about enrollment. Diversity challenges students -- and faculty -- to consider alternative perspectives and to question the validity of assumptions they hold. Engaging with a diverse group lets students and staff practice respectful and logical communication. These experiences are essential for citizens of an ever-shrinking world and are foundational for successful economists.

Diversity can add more value to a school than a multicultural picture on its website. Diversity in faculty, students, staff, and course material can encourage minorities to attend a school they may otherwise feel uncomfortable in. It can improve the way students exchange and create ideas. It can educate and excite the local community. Experiencing diversity and interacting with a diverse student body can also help students develop skills necessary in their discipline. I am committed to increasing diversity, engaging in discussion, and learning from people with different experiences and perspectives. I am excited to work for an institution that shares my goals.