

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The presence of “diversity” in educational settings has become a guide star of quality and sophistication. Though trending, many professionals only have an interest that arises from mandates and risk management. Such narrow views are harmful and misguided. The legal industry must move away from static views of traditional labels as the sum of diversity – “this group” represents diversity, while “that group doesn’t.” Diversity rests on a continuum relative to the setting.

Of course, we must continue to recognize the minority groups typically standing under the diversity umbrella. However, the extent to which any institution should focus on any one of those groups or other non-traditional minorities will vary by the characteristics of the institution. For example, at Florida A & M University College of Law (a historically black college or university), 46% of the entering class of 2017 was African American, compared to 29% Caucasian, 19% Latino, and 4% Asian; meanwhile, the University of Florida Levin College of Law only recognized 31.5% of its entering 2017 class as having “racial and ethnic diversity.” Diversity initiatives at these schools should look very different, but with the same end-goals – improve the legal profession by helping students learn to accept, empathize with, and assist all of humanity.

It is troubling that neither of the schools in the above example include percentages for sexual orientation, gender fluidity, socioeconomic, or neurodiversity. Each year, these demographic groups gain greater recognition and demand equality and fair treatment in schools and workplaces. As society evolves, the panoply of diversity will add other identities not yet realized. Thus, diversity initiatives at law schools should include training on social and anthropological awareness. The attorney who is slow to recognize an emerging group will be among the first to inadvertently discriminate against or offend a member of such a group, and it only takes one offensive attorney to create a sense of intimidation for that group about all of the legal community. Even those of diverse backgrounds are guilty of stereotyping and implicit biases.

As a former practicing attorney and educator, I am intrigued by concepts of unseen diversity, such as neurodiversity and socioeconomic disparities. Recently, the Florida Bar admitted a female attorney who is on the autism spectrum. That example of successful accommodations for neurodiversity is breaking barriers. Though most people only think of neurodiversity as autism, it includes many disorders that, but for diagnosis and labeling, might go unnoticed by others, for example migraines, major depressive disorder, schizophrenia, and ADHD. It must be noted that “neurodiversity” is a controversial term that some students of diverse neurological conditions refuse to accept, viewing their affliction as medical, rather than genetic - something to treat, rather than to accommodate. Students of depressed socioeconomic backgrounds share similar fears of stigmatization and may avoid asking for assistance, limiting their opportunities for success in the classroom. Efforts to diversify a student body and the profession must offer a sense of safety and compassion so that students with these hidden challenges may be accommodated. It is their presence in the legal community that helps us all learn new perspectives as a community of inquiry.

As a gay man and a person who overcame a lesser socioeconomic childhood in rural Alabama, I have experienced the lows of discrimination and the highs of truly diverse institutions, as well as the loss of opportunities due to my family’s financial limitations. And I practice what I profess; my former solo law firm's moto was *A Diverse Practice for a Diverse Community*. I am honored to have had a practice with a reputation of helping those who faced adversity. These experiences have provided me with insights that “traditional” individuals probably lack. With my personal story of diversity, I want to help the academy better assess the current state of diversity, diversify initiatives based on relative site data, and measure outcomes through the early years of legal employment. I want to help the legal industry move beyond the concept of diversity as a list of percentages for static labels.