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Reflections on diversity

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Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research

Memorandum

To: Faculty
From: Gary L. Miller 
Date: December 6, 2006
Subject: Reflections on diversity

In my first address to the university faculty on September 5, 2006, I emphasized that as an urban serving research university we have a special obligation to "...nurture a passion for diversity..." both by working to develop a more diverse faculty and student body and by leveraging our diversity to inform our courses, our programs and our approaches to the community. Recent editorials in the *Sunflower* and the *Wichita Eagle* have provided me with a welcomed opportunity to reflect on these words more deeply and to think about how we might realize this vision at Wichita State University. Permit me to share some of these thoughts with you.

When I interviewed for the position of Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research last spring, I was asked many times about my philosophy and leadership approach with respect to diversity. The question was one of the first that President Beggs asked me in our initial meeting. The questions revealed a strong acknowledgment of the importance of diversity at WSU and an appreciation for the importance of a forward-looking strategy with respect to diversity. I want to affirm my steadfast commitment to the development of a university culture that embraces diversity throughout its programs and processes. Perhaps more than any other enterprise in America, universities should reflect the great cultural, racial, and intellectual texture of the world in which we and our students and our graduates live and work. Our special opportunity as an urban serving university is to draw from the diversity of our urban community – particularly with respect to student recruitment – and give back to our community programs of learning, research and outreach that are grounded in a deep cultural awareness that comes from living with diversity and not just from the study of it.

In my September speech I said:

The engine of learning and innovation in the university is the faculty. The support of research, teaching and service must remain one of the highest priorities of the academic division.

It is thus, in my view, appropriate that one of the recent editorials calls into question our commitment to diversifying the university faculty. Ultimately, our ability to attract a diverse student body, deploy learning and research programs that use diversity, and operate as a full community partner in a diverse city will depend on our ability to recruit and sustain a diverse university faculty. It is the practical and strategic aspects of our work in this regard that I wish to comment on here.

It is important to begin by acknowledging where we are. This spring, as part of our ten-year reaccreditation exercise, we will report that in this academic year in a faculty of approximately 480 full-time faculty positions, we have nine African American, eight Hispanic, forty-two Asian/Pacific islanders and two Native American members. This represents a bit over 12% of the full-time faculty. When the international members are included in our totals, we will report that about 13% of the faculty are minority. Women comprise just over 38% of the full-time faculty. The Wichita State University faculty does not currently reflect the level of diversity that I believe is necessary for us to fulfill our mission.

Positive change in this regard will require a community-wide effort and full collaboration between administration and the faculty. Our administrative structure, which distributes responsibility for diversity issues to the divisions, is designed to enhance accountability in this area. I have challenged those who report directly to me (deans, associate vice presidents, selected directors) to adopt a more intentional oversight of the hiring process for the purpose of improving the number of minority candidates who apply. We are developing processes to apply more scrutiny to the formation of search committees and the manner in which we advertise and encourage scholars to apply for vacant positions. And, with the support of President Beggs, I am developing strategies to reduce resource barriers to hiring qualified minority candidates when they are recommended by the search committee and the dean.

However, administrative strategies and structures such as these will not, alone, ensure that we will succeed in diversifying the faculty. Faculty must also take an affirmative role in the search process by insisting that extraordinary measures are taken to invite under-represented groups to apply for open positions and by encouraging all members of their department to reflect deeply on attitudes and preconceptions that might subconsciously disadvantage candidates who differ from the department majority. I am prepared to provide resources for training to nurture this process.

In the end, regardless of structure and policy, our commitment to a diverse faculty will be tested one search at a time. There is no magic overlay or vision statement that will ensure success. There is only our determination to work together to make improvements as a way to enrich our learning community.

I appreciate your interest and support in realizing this vision for WSU.