

ATTAINING A Diverse Campus REQUIRES INTENTIONAL, Thoughtful Action

By Katricia G. Pierson

East Central University (Okla.), like many other regional universities across the nation, has had statements about diversity and inclusion in its mission statement, priorities and values for many years. We believe we embrace all cultures, and we are open and welcoming to everyone. However, our demographics have not changed much over the years.

We see articles in higher education media on the benefits of having a diverse faculty, staff and student body. We know that a diverse faculty and staff better prepare students for entering a diverse labor market; diverse teams have greater potential for innovation; and diverse employees are better able to recruit and retain students. The university president, as I have learned after being one for the past 18 months, can be a touchstone for influencing an institution's focus on diversity.

Three events occurred that made it clear to me that being a woman and a Choctaw citizen means my leadership is different. The first happened shortly after my being named president. I attended an all-women reception. They wanted to celebrate an accomplishment

many thought they would never see—a woman leading one of the larger employers in the city. The women told me that they saw in me a future for their daughters and granddaughters. They saw a career path leading to an executive-level position as becoming “normal” for younger women. I clearly understand it is my responsibility to provide the resources, opportunities and mentoring necessary to help women move into leadership roles.

The second occurred while I walked across campus this past spring. A groundskeeper smiled and shouted, “*Halito! Chim achukma?*”—or “Hello! How are you?”—in Choctaw. He is a fellow Choctaw and felt pride in what we are accomplishing. He and I discussed the need for language preservation and ways to get more Choctaw and other Native Americans enrolled at the university. He believed having role models would make a difference, which is what the research on diversity tells us. Students need to see leaders who are like them. We can and will recruit a diverse workforce, but we must also “grow our own.” We must ask our underrepresented students to consider careers in higher education and then provide the opportunities for them to have positions when they enter the job market.

The third instance took place more recently. A small group of African-American alumni visited with me about starting a Black Alumni Association. They shared their experiences with me and the disenfranchisement they felt while students and then as alumni. We discussed ways we can bring black alumni to campus and celebrate their achievements. We also know that we will need to have honest dialogue about the experiences they had and that our students of color currently have. We know some truths will be difficult, but our shared goal of diversity will help us through the difficulty.

We must be intentional about diversifying our employees so that we can help our students, alumni and communities. We must invest in our underrepresented faculty and staff so they may develop as leaders. Our lives will be the richer for it. **P**

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