On ‘Diversity’

I have become allergic to the word *diversity*. It feels empty, or worse, like a chore. Words lose capital when they are overused or when the cultural climate that fostered their meaning changes. *Diversity* is a good example.

I am a Latino. I have strongly benefited from the drive toward diversity. I like to think of myself as fostering that drive as well. But the fervor behind it belongs to past decades. Our cultural moment is an altogether different one. America is already deeply, irrevocably diverse. Where do we go from here?
Life in the United States today is unlike what I encountered when I emigrated from Mexico in the mid-1980s. Faces have changed in overt as well as subtle ways. The changes were well underway when I arrived, thanks to the civil-rights movement and feminism; that is, they began with race and gender.

Colleges at the forefront of these changes have encountered substantial challenges. Today the transformation also includes class and gender stereotypes, although the impact of those shifts hasn’t been as dramatic as it could be nationwide. The rich are fewer than before, with extravagant amounts of wealth, and the poor are poorer. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students have begun to be recognized on a few campuses; elsewhere, not at all. These movements are growing.

Colleges have realized that it isn’t enough to open the door to previously excluded groups; the real effort is in following suit with programs that help newcomers experience themselves not as aliens in these habitats but as integral to their institutions’ overall missions. And colleges must adapt their missions to these new demographic configurations.

Not long ago, I delivered a lecture to 500 students at a small liberal-arts college in the Northeast that uses the phrase “people of color” in its brochures, even though its student body is more than 95 percent white. (Believe me, it takes only seconds for visitors to a campus to recognize a collective lie). I talked about “fake diversity.” My comments received enthusiastic applause from the young audience, while administrators looked embarrassed in the back. Not that they were the guilty ones. In my experience, obstacles to diversity often come from a higher level, like an institution’s Board of Trustees, where outdated ideas may simmer.

Universities are a microcosm of society, where anxiety over race, gender, and class is writ large. It is the stuff of constant jokes that the Washington elite is mostly white (http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/01/05/the-new-congress-is-80-percent-white-80-percent-male-and-92-percent-christian/) whereas the electorate — the rest of us — is increasingly heterogeneous. The Supreme Court may be increasingly diverse; the first Latina justice, Sonia Sotomayor, has now been on the bench for four years. But whenever it prepares to ponder an issue with lasting social consequences, I can’t help but wonder who will win: those who prefer the America of the past or those who understand the future.

So we are all aware of the implications of our seismic moment, the rapid pace with which the status quo is reconfigured. The question is how to describe — or better, what name to give to that plurality — the components of that reconfiguration. Maybe it isn’t about finding a replacement
word for *diversity* that will also lose currency in time. *Diversity* came about in order to diagnose a deficit. The diagnosis has been established and stratagems have been sought. Now we as a culture have moved on.

*Merriam-Webster* defines *diversity* as “the quality or state of having many different forms, types, ideas, etc.,” and also as “the state of having people who are different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization.” It goes without saying that any environment, made of parts, is a composite, a sum of elements. In 2015, to describe the United States as racially or culturally diverse is to state the obvious. What happens in that environment, to what extent its dissimilar components are able to find a common ground, and whether that common ground has the capacity to become a feature of the collective body, is what the present-day United States is truly about.

At the macro level, we have a black president — with a legacy as uneven as that of his precursors. Women, nonwhites, and gay people are leaders at all levels across the country, including on campuses. We even have a pope from Argentina, which in Latin America is often described as the edge of the world. There is still a lot to achieve, and that task pertains to us all. But the glass ceiling has been broken.

This is not to say that diversity in leadership and other realms will solve our problems. It simply allows for equal opportunity to succeed as well as to fail.

It seems to me that when college administrators open a diversity center or appoint a chief diversity officer these days, they are showcasing an outmoded mentality. That center is likely to become a ghetto, reserved for those who aren’t like everyone else. The objective of diversity is no longer to make groups or projects more heterogeneous; instead, it is to find a new normal for a diverse ecosystem.

In short, *diversity* feels jingoistic, its message old-fashioned. It has lost cachet. Americans no longer strive to be pluralistic; we already are. Our present objective is to find out what kind of balance our pluralism can sustain, and whether such political, social, and cultural transformations will ever truly lead to *e pluribus unum*, “of the many, one.”