

Synthesis Essay on Diversity

My own cultural competency is built on a lifetime of international experiences. I grew up on the Galapagos Islands, later attended high school in Nairobi, Kenya and I now visit my parents annually in Mexico. Growing up surrounded by cultures different from my own, I was encouraged to identify and value both the commonalities and differences of the human experience. As a student, exposure to diverse peoples was instrumental in shaping my worldview and values. To demonstrate how I employ my cultural competency in the classroom I will focus here on my work over the past two years with the UC ABC Biology Undergraduate Scholars Program (BUSP). Based on my experiences teaching college students, I expect the students in a biology classroom at XYZ Community College to be diverse in innumerable ways. My work with BUSP students exemplifies how I approach working with non-traditional students, and is also indicative of what I will accomplish as a professor at XYZ.

The majority of BUSP students come from historically underserved backgrounds, whose educational and economic circumstances limit their academic opportunities. The purpose of BUSP is to help these students develop the skills necessary to succeed as life science majors. I developed and taught a “Bio Boot Camp,” designed to give BUSP students a head-start on content and study skills necessary for the year long introductory biology course they take as sophomores. I designed the course to be intense—we met daily for three weeks—and rigorous, but my priority was to help students enjoy the fundamentals of biology. The students who participate in the Bio Boot Camp come from Anglo, Latino/a, African, Asian and Afghani cultures, and the majority are female.

Growing up overseas, I know what it feels like to find oneself outside the dominant culture. In science the widespread image of a scientist is: an older, white male who works in a lab. This pervasive image may be discouraging for students who do not “fit in” based on their own identities. One of my goals as a biology instructor is to make sure that my students are exposed to the variety of ways that one may be a scientist. To accomplish this goal, my BUSP students met with several scientists from diverse backgrounds who did not fit the scientist stereotype. For example, we visited the UC ABC Botanical Conservatory and met with the Conservatory director, Mr. X. As a former BUSP graduate Mr. X exemplified a successful alternative career as a plant biologist (no lab coat required!). The field trip offered a memorable hands-on experience for students who had little previous practice with plants. On course evaluations many students indicated that this field trip was a highlight for them. Additionally, one student asked to volunteer with Mr. X at the Conservatory.

The BUSP students were of diverse ethnicities but also differed in numerous other ways. I wanted to make sure that during Bio Boot Camp each student had an opportunity to explore areas of science that were personally relevant to them. As I discussed in my Statement of Teaching Philosophy, I gave my students a range of assignment choices to let them identify and explore their own interests. Some students chose to write children’s books about photosynthesis and

biodiversity. Others interviewed their parents, many of whom had immigrated to the United States, in order to learn more about the ecology of their ancestral homes. In class, the students explained and discussed their assignment choices, and they peer-reviewed rough drafts. The cross cultural exposure was subtle, but by working together my students learned about one another and also learned about different biological topics.

My awareness and appreciation of cross cultural understanding grows continually. I work to maintain my fluency in Spanish because practicing a second language helps me appreciate the challenge faced by students who are simultaneously learning English and biology. As a mentor and a teacher I try to carefully listen to my students. I strive to set aside my own perceptions of what biological concepts are “easy” or “hard” to understand because these assumptions are based on my cultural and educational background, not that of my students. Finally, I am inspired when my students learn about biology in ways that are meaningful to them. As such, I strive to introduce them to scientists from an array of backgrounds, and support students as they shape their own identities as scientists.