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Diversity or Disaster: Only at Tulane. Only in New Orleans.

As university admission becomes more competitive year after year, top tier public and private institutions strive to make university profiles more appealing for students of all backgrounds. In addition to the amount of qualified students applying to higher education, the cost of tuition continues to skyrocket. According to U.S. News, “Over the past 35 years, college tuition at public universities has nearly quadrupled” and in the past 20 years “tuition and fees of private institutions has risen 179 percent”.¹ Due to these increases, universities have created a nationwide competitive marketplace not only selling their libraries and prestigious faculty, but a less tangible campus environment where students feel they may belong.² While the collective quest to pursue educational excellence may seem holistically positive, the shift toward this hyper-competitive model has resulted in some unforeseen side effects, one of which being misrepresentation of reality regarding diversity on campus.³⁴

Coming from large public schools on the West Coast of the United States, the education I received was extremely diverse and inclusive. As early as I can remember, my classmates and I were taught that “everyone is special” and while we may not look like each other, the differences between each individual is what makes our school great.⁵ This message stuck with me when I

¹ Logos

² Antithesis

³ Procatelopsis

⁴ Ethos

⁵ Pathos

enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program in order to pursue a more globally minded education and surround myself with a group of diverse and likeminded students. Upon applying for college, I scoured the internet for universities that shared my views and would further my multifaceted and intersectional education. I found Tulane University, a medium sized school in the heart of New Orleans, a hub for rich and intriguing culture in the South. Because I did not have the funds to travel to Louisiana, my only method to obtain information about the university is via its website. The site was plastered⁶ with the slogan “Only at Tulane. Only in New Orleans.”. The slogan sang promises of a truly unique experience, one that would open a student’s eyes to the vast culture of New Orleans and urban diversity as a whole—exactly what I was looking for.⁷ The parallel structure of the statement indicates the university and city surrounding it are one in the same. By coupling Tulane with New Orleans, a city known for “its rich melting pot of French, Caribbean, and African culture,” one can assume the university shares these qualities (New Orleans Online).⁸ However, after experiencing the campus for almost a semester, I now understand our slogan could not be further from reality. Tulane represents a wealthy, predominately white institution which lacks in nearly all aspects of diversity.⁹ I contend that Tulane utilizes cultural appropriation of New Orleans and loaded language regarding diversity along with political buzzwords in order to make it a more viable option for students in an increasingly competitive environment.

⁶ Loaded language

⁷ Personification

⁸ Metaphor

⁹ Antithesis

When analyzing Tulane’s website, the main source of information regarding the university, the reader is greeted with many slideshows of students doing various activities.¹⁰ Every picture on the site displays at least one, if not multiple, minority groups which falsely represents the university as a multicultural environment. Furthermore, locating the student demographics at the university is nearly impossible unless one utilizes third party sites. In fact, searching diversity through the website toolbar brings up only the University Diversity Statement. According to this statement, Tulane “focuses specifically on fostering greater diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability at every level of university life. The central premise at Tulane is to intentionally integrate diversity efforts into the core aspects of the institution to maximize success as a Carnegie-designated Research University” (Diversity and Inclusion). The use of the word “fostering” implies a nurturing environment for “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability” on campus. The language used by the university makes the reader inclined to believe Tulane strives in these categories. However, this perception is only achievable through the omission of student demographic data. When all of the information is

STUDENTS	
Ethnicity of Students from U.S.	0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native 3.3% Asian 8.6% Black/African-American 6.4% Hispanic/Latino 3.4% Multi-race (not Hispanic/Latino) 0.1% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander 72.9% White 5.0% Unknown
International Students	3.1% from 40 countries
First-Year Students Returning	92.0%
Students Graduating Within 4 Years	72.5%
Graduates Offered Full-Time Employment Within 6 Months	44%
Graduates Pursuing Advanced Study Directly	Not reported

¹⁰ Personification

accounted for, it is clear to see that the university has little to no diversity to “foster”. The chart above from the College Board, a nationally recognized agency specializing in college data, shows the university as a whole is nearly 73% white, with no one minority achieving even 10% representation (College Factual).¹¹ The connotation of the statement is then warped from proactive support of diversity to an apologetic tone, compensating for shortcomings. This rhetorical appeal continues with website statements such as “Tulane recognizes” and “Tulane can” in regard to shifting the paradigm regarding minority acceptance. The word “recognize” means to “acknowledge the existence, validity, or legality of” which implies the lack of progress on campus regarding diversity (Oxford). Rather than saying “Tulane champions” or “Tulane continually supports” when discussing diversifying campus, the mere recognition of the need for diversity implies inaction. While the university knows the problem exists, they have had no progress in solving the inequality. This reality is only made clear through independent outside information. And again, in order to mask this failure, at the bottom of the page the all too familiar slogan “Only at Tulane. Only at New Orleans.” is displayed in large, colorful text in contrast to the size 12, Times New Roman font of the previous message.

The homogenous reality of Tulane University and its inability to diversify its campus is reinforced through the language and structure of the “Embedding Diversity and Inclusive Excellence” report created in 2013. The opening line of the executive summary is as follows: “Grounded in the rich cultural mix of New Orleans and Louisiana, Tulane University upholds diversity and inclusion as inherent values.” While the word “grounded” connotes a sense of deep connection between the university and New Orleans, examining the context of the report paints a

¹¹ Logos

different picture.¹² This report's sole purpose is to address the problems with diversity on campus but prefaces the plan with the irrelevant fact that Tulane is located in New Orleans. This instance of redirection is particularly important because the sole purpose of the document is to act as a resource to address institutional problems. If a plan to change the university's policy toward diversity is still riddled with cultural appropriation, then white domination on campus will only perpetuate.¹³

Tulane University's appropriation of New Orleans culture in order to mask shortcomings in the field of diversity represent a new form of "racetalk" which has been identified by researchers at University of Michigan and Texas A&M University.¹⁴ Professors Tyrone Forman and Eduardo Bonilla-Silvia have concluded that while "whites' racial attitudes" have only become more prejudice, "themes and arguments they mobilize attempt to avoid appearing racist", especially when in the eye of the public (50).¹⁵ Furthermore, the publication explains the increasing frequency of phrases such as "I am not racist, but..." in order to defuse racist accusations. While Tulane's practices might not be a direct manifestation of racism, it would be naïve to deny their manipulation of language and appropriation of culture in order to distract from their horrific diversity numbers and lack of concrete action in order to remedy the problem.¹⁶ Fanciful language such as that found in Tulane's strategic plan describing the "cultivation of an environment of diversity, openness, and inclusiveness" along with "deeply rooted connection to New Orleans" acts as an institutionalized form of the phrase, "I am not racist, but..." as it merely aims to distract from the administration's inaction (2000). It is

¹² Personification

¹³ Pathos

¹⁴ Personification

¹⁵ Ethos

¹⁶ Logos

extremely important to recognize this trend within the university as it is the only way to forge meaningful change on campus rather than thinly veiled rhetorical attempts.

Another way in which the university has altered its perception as a diverse school is through the misuse of the political buzzword *diversity*. Upon entering Tulane, days before school begins, each student attends a presentation by President Fitts along with other Tulane administration. During the presentation this year, President Fitts made the claim that Tulane was one of the most diverse schools in the nation. Shocked with disbelief, I searched the internet to find Tulane was ranked #1371 in regard to diversity (College Factual).¹⁷ Upon confronting Fitts about this discrepancy, he cordially explained how he “was referring to the amount of states students came from.” While the word “diversity” is defined as “the condition or fact of being different or varied” this definition (Fitts’ definition)¹⁸ does not fit the current connotation of the word, nor is it applicable to the sociological nature of our discussion. Rather, the more applicable definition would be “the mix of races and religions that make up a group of people” (Cambridge). While President Fitts, a highly educated and socially aware man, is most likely aware of the definition of diversity, he still used an inapplicable definition in order to skew the perception of the university. While this speech would not have been shown to potential college applicants and thus would not effect Tulane’s competitiveness, the use of misleading rhetoric only creates stagnation within the university.¹⁹ If students are lead to believe Tulane is diverse, only the few who independently research the topic will be able to address the problems we face.

The combination of all the aforementioned rhetorical strategies ultimately leads to creating a “View From Nowhere”, a term originating from philosopher Thomas Nagel in 1989.

¹⁷ Logos

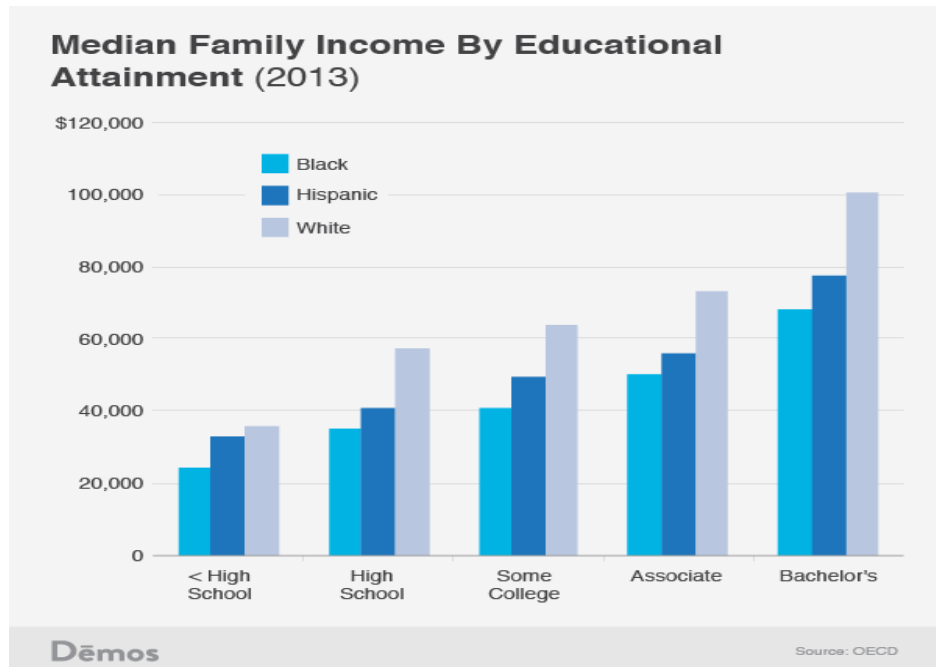
¹⁸ Distincto

¹⁹ Procatelopsis

Nagel’s philosophy essentially states that individuals attempting to persuade others sometimes “exclude relevant pieces of information” which allows for the perceiver to make assumptions about the given information, thus misleading them and creating a view from nowhere that is a misrepresentation of reality.²⁰ When looking for information regarding universities, one cannot fully understand the campus environment without physically visiting. Even then, potential students are only given a small snapshot of what the university may be like. However, due to economic restraints this is not possible for a majority of students. Thus, the sole source of “reliable” information regarding the campus is found through the university’s website.²¹

Therefore, universities control a monopoly on information regarding their school and can create extremely harmful “Views From Nowhere” which destroy any reliability when attempting to make informed choices about college. This can be detrimental as it could lead to many students choosing universities that are not the correct fit for them, resulting in dissatisfaction and leading to eventual dropout, which I have personally questioned myself.²²

The graph created by Demos, a public policy research organization, showcases how the “View From Nowhere” provided by Tulane and many other universities could have a



²⁰ Metabasis

²¹ Metabasis

²² Pathos

monumental effect on the outcome of a student's life. Dropping out of college before completion could lead to over a \$40,000 dollar salary reduction, a drop that would completely alter the lifestyle of the individual. Thus, not only does the "View From Nowhere" have negative social implications, but also vast economical ramifications.²³

Not only are these practices unethical, they seek to continue of the cycle of ignorance regarding social issues. Universities are being held to the highest standards for the accurate dissemination of information from all fields of education. Yet, information regarding the institution itself remains unchecked and unfiltered, hurting the lives of many Americans who drop out as a result of misinformation. Ultimately, Tulane University's ploy to become more competitive in high education only ends up hurting its students in the long run.

²³ Metabasis

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