

TALKING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

To: The Seminar
From: **K. Shingles**
Subject: *Carnegie Mellon's MLK Day Events*
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I laughed to myself while reading the title of President Cohon's speech listed in the program—State of Diversity at Carnegie Mellon. It reminded me of the State of the Union Address that US Presidents give after they're elected, when they (and their nationalism) appear on each channel dignified, poised, and composed. I cannot say for sure what it was I expected from President Cohon's speech that afternoon—honestly maybe I expected nothing, maybe I expected him to just brag to the audience about how wonderfully diverse CMU is by showing a couple of supporting graphs from the annual report. However, I did not expect him to admit in his conclusive observation that they/we lack a “strategic vision regarding the demographic composition of the campus”. It wasn't the best news to hear as a student, but it was good to know that his opinions of the campus reflected what I and many of the students felt. Yeah we're: 13.2% International Students, 6.5% Permanent Resident, 6% Black, 5% Hispanic, 33% Asian American, and 36.3% Caucasian—but that speaks nothing for the college experience all of these students have individually and socially, that yields no insight on how to transform our campus full of separate clubs and entities into a campus community. As far as the faculty, I know I've only seen (and had) Caucasian, Asian, and European (i.e. French, Suisse, etc.) professors in my ECE courses. I know how elated I was upon discovering that two black poets (Professor Terrance Hayes and Professor Anthony Butts) had been hired by the English department my junior year. But I didn't know the statistics for the number of minority faculty that are hired here and I never had time to really make a big deal about it, but “minorities make-up less than 5% of the tenured faculty,” he said and no minorities are a part of the president's council, its “all white and that's a problem”. I would've never thought it was “a problem” per se (just a construct of the reality that I've become accustomed to seeing—all white councils, all white staffs, predominantly white Congress, etc.), but for him to admit that openly showed an instance of sincerity that is rare among many leaders these days. For once, someone took CMU off of its pedestal and exposed its problems. The most profound part of Cohon's speech was within the

folds of the little pamphlets distributed on each seat. The pamphlet was not propaganda to attract exceptional students to this school, and it was not a pledge card asking for donations/contributions; rather it was a statement by Cohon explaining why affirmative action is important. To hear him defend affirmative action at the school was not just important for me, but somehow almost therapeutic—perhaps that is what I needed someone here to finally say publicly; that everyone here deserves to be here, that everyone here was chosen based on their academic performance and the kinds of contributions they can make to the campus, and that everyone here is capable of excelling. I can not say why I am here at this school and what I contribute to this institution, I do not know what process the enrollment office used when they decided to admit me into this school, but at least now one ghost in my head is silenced, because whether I struggle in my engineering courses or gain admission into an honor society or not one thing is for certain—I’ve made it here and I *do* deserve to be here and that’s all that matters.

I’ve listened to many big name speakers in the past telling me what I should be doing, how I should be celebrating MLK Day, what it should mean to me and its relevance for all people. I guess yesterday I just wanted to hear someone like me (young, a student, someone not getting paid to talk, expressive, passionate) express the importance of MLK Day in another way. I still regret not submitting a poem to the MLK writing contest here, but when seeing the different faces of those who entered I realized that I was a part of the audience for a reason yesterday. Each writer was different and wrote on a different topic not solely based on their race, but their different lifestyles, different religion, and unique family history. Their voices differed along with their writing style and presentation, but they were all linked by the fact that instead of just talking about the significance of MLK’s dream, they were actually living it, they were actually practicing what it meant to be “judged by the content of your character and not the color of your skin”. As different and young as they were, they were still making a difference by their words and making impressions on their family, friends, professors, and absolute strangers. A Hispanic high school girl wrote poetry about the intense features of a black man, a Caucasian CMU student admitted she was Catholic and bisexual and proud, an Indian CMU student told how he was always “randomly selected” to be searched at the airport but he dreams to become a “great American leader” nonetheless. I dreamed that I would no longer be afraid to publicly

make a difference—strange, isn't it, how hearing something a little different makes you feel so different.