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LDRS 1016- Final Leadership Reflection

When I entered Virginia Tech and Leadership 1016, I was not as knowledgeable and aware of issues people face everyday as I am now, after completing the diversity leadership class and my freshman semester of college. I have grown up in a very small town where everybody knows each other and individuals live a very similar lifestyles. All of my life, I have known there is a more cultured and diverse world out there than where I grew up, I just have never had the opportunity to be exposed to the differences. In the past few months, I have experienced living with and interacting with such a diverse group of individuals. Being exposed to people who grew up differently than me has made me more aware of the differences in our world and made me think more critically than I ever have before. In a way, the different situations and lifestyles I have been introduced to have made me a more knowledgeable and informed individual, and I am now able to see the world from many different views.

As I previously stated, I am now much more aware of issues, discrimination, and other cultural differences now that I have witnessed and heard stories from other individuals. I have never had to dig deeper to understand how others felt besides issues

such as stereotyping in high school. Students with disabilities were in their own wing of my high school and there were few African Americans that attended my high school, or that even lived in my town. I have never had to deal with ageism in my lifetime and classism is not something that I have been exposed to or had to worry about until this year.

Transgender oppression used to be a foreign topic to be because I have never interacted with anyone who is transgender. Understanding the history of individuals such as immigrants who are discriminated against as well as discrimination of homosexuals, and the complicated lifestyle of those with disabilities, has become easier for me because I have heard first hand stories from people who deal with these issues every day or whose family members have dealt with these issues. I feel that going over all of the “isms” in class has opened my eyes to how others live their everyday lives and it has made me so thankful for the life I have. Aside from educating me further and letting me see how others live, I feel that I want to be more considerate toward others and I want to be a confidant and a refuge for those who are experiencing anything negative related to the “isms” we discussed in class. I feel that something that I can take away from all of these “isms” as an American citizen is to be more understanding and accepting toward others. The country we live in is a very diverse place and we should never take the freedom that we have for granted. With that being said, individuals should respect the freedom that we do have and be considerate

of the choices and lifestyles of others. The fact that so many people are different is what makes America the strong and powerful country it is today.

Of all of the “isms” that we learned, discussed and analyzed throughout the semester, the one that stands out the most to me is heterosexism. I feel passionate about this because it is the “ism” that I have the most experience with out of all of the themes that were presented to us. While in high school, I was a lifeguard for four summers. I worked with a boy who had been one of my good friends since eighth grade. Most people who met and knew him assumed he was “gay,” but I always assumed he just had the mannerisms of a gay individual because he always shared his girl problems with me. The summer after his freshman year of college he shared some very personal information with me while we were lifeguarding. He told me that he was gay and that he had known this since he was in elementary school, but he never felt that he could be his true self for the fear of being judged and discriminated. I was very honored that he confided in me and came to me for advice about such a serious issue. At first, I was one of the few people he shared his secret with, but then he began telling more people. I was there to experience first hand the troubles that he had been facing all of his life. Once his parents found out about his secret, his biggest fear of his parents’ in acceptance became a reality. His parents were not supportive of his lifestyle and they made him move home and take a semester off of college

because they blamed college and his freedom for him being gay. At first his parents didn't even want to let him live with them and they were going to make him support himself fully, but after many conversations with him they became more understanding. Seeing all of the issues my friend faced because of his sexuality was very saddening for me. Even though I thought there was a chance that he was gay from the minute we met, I did not judge him or feel any different about him than I would if he were straight. Just as my friend experienced, I do not think any individual should have to face these issues. Families should be accepting of their children and support them in whatever they want to do in life as long as it does not harm something or someone. My hope for the future is that more individuals will become more accepting of individuals who stray away from the "traditional" lifestyle. Because of my current knowledge of "isms" and this past experience, I feel that I will be able to relate to others and hopefully help them if they are experiencing negative feelings. Also, I know I will be exposed to a diverse group of individuals throughout my next three years of college and in the workplace after college. Now, I possess the skills to better understand how certain people feel because of all of the discussions from class.

Another reason I chose to discuss heterosexism in my final paper is because of the commercials we watched in class of celebrities speaking out and trying to stop the usage of phrases such as "that's so gay." I will admit that I have used that phrase and similar phrases

in my everyday life. When I say that I do not mean anything harmful by it, but someone else that is around could be highly offended by such a phrase. We as individuals never know how what we say or what we do is going to affect someone so it is very important that we are very aware of our actions.

The second reason for me choosing to discuss my experiences with heterosexism is because of the movie *The Laramie Project*. I had never heard of this movie until we watched it in class and I was very shocked by the story. It hurts me so bad that a person would go to the extent of killing another individual simply because he did not approve of his sexual orientation. Sadly, situations like this make the rest of the country aware of issues such as homosexuality, and hopefully something positive can be taken out of the loss of one man's life such as individuals joining together to stop the discrimination. It was very moving to see how unified the town became after the death of Matthew Sheppard and I feel sure that the rest of the country was affected in some way also. My opinion on situations like the violence in Laramie, Wyoming, is that you do not have to believe in or live out the choices of others, but you must accept them for the unique people they are. As cliché as it sounds, the individuality of others is what makes the world a better place because we can see and experience different cultures and lifestyles and hopefully better ourselves from those experiences.

Ways that I will be able to use my knowledge of homosexuality as well as the other “isms” we discussed in the future are that I will be more educated on the terms and I can hopefully be an understanding friend to counsel anyone who is experiencing negative effects of homosexuality. I never have personally discriminated against those who have publically shared their sexuality, and hopefully I can talk to those who I know who are not accepting of the topic and change their points of view. I feel that the majority of people who are not okay with social issues such as homosexuality are individuals who are concerned with keeping the world the way it has been in the past years. Today’s world is ever changing and the key to having a peaceful world is going to have to be accepting the differences of others.

Throughout the course of the semester, I have learned that I need to be more aware of the world and the issues that are faced in everyday life in order to see life through other’s eyes. Throughout the “isms” that we discussed, I feel that I have become more open to individuals who are different and have lived a different life than I have. I have always known that everyone is equal and I would like to lead the world to accept every individual as his or her unique self. Leadership 1016 has been very beneficial to me in the sense that the content I have learned will be very applicable in my life because it has made me more aware of the differences and the hardships that others face. This class has helped me to see

life and society from a different point of view, and I hope what I have learned will guide me to be a better person.