**DIVERSITY CHALLENGES AT EASTERN UNIVERSITY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Dr. Audrey Lewis, an African American professor at Eastern University, had just finished an animated conversation with Ram Thackrey, an international student from India. Ram was the President of the Student Senate and was currently taking Professor Lewis’s course on Global Diversity. He often shared his thoughts and perceptions with Dr. Lewis since he knew her well and had taken three of her classes in the past. Therefore, when he told her that he felt that Eastern University was not serious about its diversity efforts and only paid lip service to the issue, Dr. Lewis was not surprised. Ram asked for Dr. Lewis’ help in changing the culture of EU and she wondered if she should become involved in his change efforts since she had to work there.

Ram, a graduating senior, had felt for a long time that the University lumps the minority student population in one category even though these groups have differing needs. As the President of the Student Senate, he was very influential and had talked with various administrators including the President of the University about diversity issues on campus. Ram had lobbied for the university to pay more attention to the housing needs of international students by keeping the dorms open during short breaks, offering meal choices that would appeal to the tastes and dietary needs of international students, providing supports for more English as a second language classes, and giving minority students more voice in the planning of social activities on campus. Despite these repeated conversations with administration, Ram felt that nothing ever changed on the diversity front.

Ram felt that the university’s widely publicized strategic goal of achieving a twenty percent international and ten percent domestic minority student body within five years was admirable. The University President often spoke of these goals in campus community meetings and wrote about them in communications to the entire campus community, but Ram felt the supports for more diverse students were not in place to accomplish this goal. The latest incident he shared with Dr. Lewis supported his perceptions. This experience seemed to have pushed Ram beyond the edge. Ram told Dr. Lewis that although he was graduating, he was going to work hard to improve the diversity climate at EU. When Professor Lewis inquired as to what happened, Ram shared the following story.

**THE STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL’S BACK**

Earlier, Ram held a meeting with Eastern students in his capacity as president of the student senate. At the end of the meeting he was walking down a corridor in the student center, preparing to exit the building and saw the Student Affairs Vice President, Dr. Lou Chambers, showing some of the members of the University Board of Trustees the Student Center building and the proposed renovations that would take place during the summer. As Ram approached them from behind to introduce himself as the Student Senate President, he heard Dr. Chambers say to the three Trustees, “This is the minority corner.” Dr. Chambers chuckled and pointed to where the new Gay Pride Center, Women’s Center, and Multicultural Center would be located. “We like to keep them all together,” said Dr. Chambers as he laughed and continued the tour. Ram stopped in his tracks. The statement that appeared part of a normal innocent conversation to Dr. Chambers was shocking to Ram. Ram was now convinced that the highest levels of Eastern University Administration simply did not get the fact that their thinking about minorities was inherently biased. Something had to be done, and had to be done now!

**RAM THACKREY’S CULTURE CHANGE PLAN**

With only two weeks until graduation, Ram told Dr. Lewis that he needed a bold plan to change the culture of Eastern to make it more inclusive and in a “eureka” moment he had devised one. He decided that he would begin to change the culture of Eastern by writing a letter to members of the University’s Board of Trustees, bypassing EU’s president and other administrators, detailing his concerns about the culture of Eastern University. He stated that the letter would end with a challenge to the Trustees, requesting their immediate attention to this matter. Further, he told Dr. Lewis that he was not concerned about the chain of command or proper protocol since none of his previous actions had been successful.

**EASTERN UNIVERSITY BACKGROUND**

Eastern University is a small, private, New England university with a student population of approximately 5000 students. Until 2004, Eastern University was known as Eastern College, a small specialty business school, granting undergraduate and Master’s degrees in the business disciplines only. Because of its business only focus, Eastern College always had a problem with diversity. Throughout the 1990’s Eastern was a predominately white, conservative, mostly male campus. International and domestic minority students comprised less than one percent of the total student population. Female students were also in the minority at Eastern College.

When the new President, Jim Hedley, was hired in 1996, Eastern College began to change its strategic direction and undertook several initiatives that would enhance and improve its diversity. President Hedley hired Dr. Lou Chambers, the Vice President for Student Affairs to take the University to a new level in supporting the students. Because of his prior academic experience, as Vice President for Student Affairs at a large state university in Michigan, Dr. Chambers understood the importance of diversity in higher education. President Hedley and Vice President Chambers immediately implemented several programs designed to support the diversity efforts at Eastern.

One of the most notable changes in the coming years was EU’s transition from a college to a university. Two separate colleges including The College of Business and the College of Arts and Sciences were established within Eastern. This led to increased enrollments and a more diverse student body. A second major change was to move Eastern to become a Division One school for athletics. Due to the infusion of a significant number of minority athletes on the sports teams, the University student body increased significantly in diversity. In addition, the University started to invest heavily in recruiting students from abroad with a big push to get more students from India, China, and South America. Hence the number of international students increased as well.

Eventually, President Hedley and his wife also inaugurated a new Interfaith Center at the University to emphasize inclusion and acceptance of all faiths represented in the diverse student and faculty body at EU. Integrating diversity as part of the University strategy moving into the future was clearly part of President Hedley’s general orientation.

**DIVERSITY AT EASTERN UNIVERSITY**

These changes helped change the demographic mix of EU’s student population to its current levels of 8.2% domestic minority and 16.2% international representing 40 countries. The conservative culture of EU did not readily embrace the newly diverse student body. GLBT students were often targets of harassment and threats. Minority students were sometimes called derogatory names outside of the classroom and international students complained of isolation and stereotyping. Thus, Eastern experienced severe growing pains in its diversity efforts. Further, the university did little to improve the conditions diverse students experienced beyond creating a Women’s Center, a Multicultural Center and a Gay Pride Center. Thus, students had a place to meet, but there was no real change to the University’s structure where minority students were concerned.

The major diversity efforts at Eastern consisted of a “What Diversity Means to Me,” contest held each spring, the establishment of a Diversity Council which met to discuss diversity concerns, a special one week summer orientation program to help international students adjust to the new campus environment, and a policy for reporting hate incidents which was included in the University’s student handbook. Ram felt that while these efforts were a good beginning, they were far from complete and much more needed to be done. Ram constantly met with the President of the University and the Vice President for Student Affairs about his concerns. Ram’s demands, lack of patience around diversity issues, and outspoken nature became so intense that he was seen as a hot head and loose cannon by faculty and administrators alike.

**RAM’S ACTION**

The day before commencement, Dr. Lewis ran into Ram in a chance encounter. Ram stopped her and told her that he sent the letter to the members of the University’s Board of Trustees. Ram handed Dr. Lewis a sealed envelope which contained a copy of his letter and asked if she would meet with him on Monday and continue to assist him in his culture change efforts after his graduation. As Dr. Lewis took the letter, she wondered what Ram had written and if he had thoroughly developed the “next steps” in his organization change plan. While Dr. Lewis admired Ram’s passion and commitment for this cause, she had to live in this system. As a result, she asked herself if she should even get involved.