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As a former NCAA student-athlete, administrator, and executive, I have learned and benefitted from diversity and inclusion on a daily basis. A deep and abiding passion for diversity and inclusion has become a part of the fabric of who I am – and I have intercollegiate athletics to thank for that.

As a bit of background, I was born and raised in a small town (450 residents) named Hoffman, located in southern Illinois, 45 miles due east of St. Louis. My parents, Bob and Sheila, owned a family lumber yard. After school, my older sister Jodi, my younger brother Mike, and I worked at the lumber yard. For me and my siblings, diversity consisted of ‘men and women’ – and – ‘young and old.’ It was a homogeneous community in every way.

After success in high school basketball, I attended the University of Illinois on a basketball scholarship. When I arrived at Illinois, my eyes were opened to the concept of diversity and inclusion. There was diversity on my team, diversity in my dorm and diversity in each of my classes. Diversity everywhere! For the first time, I was exposed to people of different ethnic and social backgrounds; people from different states and countries; people with dramatically different upbringings and viewpoints than my own.

While at Illinois, I earned my bachelor’s and master’s degrees. I like to think that I ‘am’ that person we speak about – the person profoundly transformed by the student-athlete experience – academically, athletically and socially. From my arrival at college, to this present day, diversity and inclusion played a dramatic role in my transformation, each and every day.

Since then, I have worked 23 years in this industry and have continued to benefit from my diversity and inclusion experiences. I have worked with many different constituent groups, each with their own opinions, ideas and experiences on life. In fact, I know of no more diverse and inclusive environment than intercollegiate athletics.

Through it all, I have learned three valuable lessons:

- First, diversity hones our talents and sharpens our skills! Diversity brings an infusion of knowledge, skills and experiences and exposes us to thoughts and viewpoints that are different from our own. This challenges us to consider different ways of thinking. It is an incredible catalyst for personal and professional growth.
- Secondly, diversity creates stronger teams! Diversity supports the gathering of individuals with different and complementary strengths and skills. The strength of one team member supports the strengths of every other team member.
- Thirdly, diversity supports a culture of excellence! Where diversity and inclusion are truly present, the best ideas win. Diversity supports excellence in our thoughts and actions, as it acknowledges that no ‘one of us’ is as smart as ‘all of us.’

Lastly, I am honored to have two children who are NCAA student-athletes. I have great comfort in knowing that they too will reap rich benefits from their diversity and inclusion experiences.



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