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Shannon Cox
Roger Williams University

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The Origins of Diversity at
Roger Williams University

Shannon Cox

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Roger Williams was a man of controversial ideas, seeking to expand the freedoms of his fellow people. He believed in equality and the inclusion of people with varied origins and identities. During the seventeenth century, the Church of England was sought to be corrupt and the royals were tyrannical. In response to the inequity of the Church, the Puritans set out from England to establish a new place where they would be able to practice their beliefs and share a personal relationship with God. Their new development, a city upon a hill, is where they were able to obey God's laws and freely express their religious beliefs. John Winthrop was an important figure in the foundation of a New England, leading the Puritans to plant the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Winthrop offered Roger Williams a great position in the colony, but Williams declined. Williams eventually accepted a church post in Salem, Massachusetts. He was ordered to leave the Bay Colony within six weeks in October of 1635. Making his way to Narragansett Bay, Williams chose a place to settle and bought the land from the Native Americans. His relationship with the Native Americans grew quickly as they taught Williams to harvest, trade, and speak their Algonquin language. Without the help of the Native Americans, the forming of the new world, Providence, wouldn't have been as successful as it was.

Becoming close with the Native Americans was a risky yet worthwhile decision for Roger Williams. Williams was interested in creating equality for not only religious beliefs, but also the acceptance of those who may be different. Roger Williams' views of diversity are reflected at Roger Williams University, located in Bristol, Rhode Island as his name is a memorial for this university. John Barry discusses Roger Williams' ideas about the government and religion, "He therefore concluded that the government must remove itself from anything that

touched upon human beings' relationship with God.”¹ Roger Williams felt that it was important for people to be able to practice their religious beliefs without the interference of the government or anyone else for that matter.

At Roger Williams University, there is the Spiritual Life Program, which encourages interaction among people of different faiths. This group organizes events throughout the school year, regarding religious holidays and beliefs, while also opening the events to the broader RWU community. During Ramadan, followers of Islam are able to gather daily in the Intercultural Center for the breaking of the fast and prayer. They also join every Friday for congregational prayer. The Intercultural Center is an area on campus that is accessible by all members of the university. It's a place to host informal socials, educational programs, and events. The goal of the center is to raise the discourse level for the issues of diversity. With the opportunity to practice religion, Roger Williams University reflects the views of Roger Williams, granting equality to those who come from all kinds of religious backgrounds.

In addition to religion, Roger Williams pushed for the acceptance of those who may have differing lifestyles than the English. The Native Americans had opposing backgrounds than the Puritans who settled in Providence. The Native Americans shared different values and used many techniques that the English were unfamiliar with. After learning the ways of the Native Americans, Roger Williams used his improved knowledge to help create a better foundation for the Colony. The trading skills, hunting, fishing, and farming that Roger Williams learned from the Native Americans allowed him, his family, and his friends to adjust to the land of Providence. The process of growing crops and hunting helped The Native Americans and settlers

¹ John Barry, "God, Government and Roger Williams' Big Idea," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2, 2012, accessed February 3rd, 2015.

build relationships and express their culture.² If it weren't for Roger Williams' courage to speak to the Native Americans and put aside their differences, the success of Providence wouldn't have been what it evolved to be.

Roger Williams University invites international students to join the academic journey. Students from all across the globe come to Roger Williams University searching for success. Students from places such as Saudi Arabia and Brazil travel to the United States and reside in Bristol, Rhode Island to attend Roger Williams University. They are given the chance to meet new people and explore different cultures. While experiencing a new environment, the international students also introduce the other students to new ways of looking at things. While allowing many cultures to come together, Roger Williams University helps students open their eyes to new values and lifestyles. It would be hard for students to be a part of a diverse community without mixing different cultures and personal backgrounds on the campus.

Roger Williams believed that there were no differences between the English and the Native Americans. "He concluded that there were no real differences between Indians and Englishmen as men. There were only cultural and religious differences."³ Williams felt all identities were to be equally accepted. The English didn't approve of Williams' views, therefore charging him with new and dangerous opinions, for which he went to trial.⁴ Even after being charged with such a thing, Williams remained determined to assure equality in addition to diversity. His relationships with the Native Americans were too strong and sincere to give up.

Roger Williams University welcomes students with all different backgrounds and identities. Some of the university's clubs reflect the devotion to making the campus a safe place. Of the many clubs and organizations offered at Roger Williams University, many of them focus

² Park Ranger John McNiff, accessed February 23rd, 2015.

³ Barry, "John M. Barry on Roger Williams and the Indians," 2, 2012, accessed February 3rd, 2015.

⁴ McNiff, accessed February 23rd, 2015.

on helping students remain open-minded when it comes to people's differences. One of the clubs at the university is called SAFE (Sexual Advocacy for Everyone), in which members of the LGBTQ community and their allies meet to discuss how they can make the campus feel safe and welcome for everyone. They also organize events and presentations to educate the other students about the different identities and pronouns. Additionally, they focus on ending stereotypes on campus, while showing students that they are also allies of those who differ from them. This club has grown immensely, indicating that the acceptance and respect at the university is progressing. Just as Roger Williams proposed, the identities of all of the students are acknowledged and understood. The students are open and ready to listen to the stories of those around them.

Roger Williams worked extremely hard to learn the language of the Native Americans. If he wasn't successful doing so, he wouldn't have been able to communicate with them and learn their lifestyles. His success, along with the success of the Native Americans and Puritans wouldn't have been the achievements that they ended to be without his knowledge of the Native American language. "Williams had a great facility with language- a great curiosity for language- and began trading with Indians and trying to learn their language."⁵ He was genuinely interested in the way the Native Americans communicated. He wrote a book describing the Native American language, while defining some of their terms and words. In this book, he also made note of cultural aspects that were important to himself and the Native Americans. "Nature knowes no difference between Europe and Americans in blood, birth, and bodies."⁶ This proves that Williams sees every human being as equal because God made all mankind. He finds it important to engage in the Native Americans' language to gain a better understanding of how they communicate and hold their relationships.

⁵ John Barry, "John M. Barry on Roger Williams and the Indians," 1.

⁶ Roger Williams, "A Key into the Language of America," 53, 1643, accessed February 25th, 2015.

Roger Williams University encourages students to study a language during their academic career. They believe that students will benefit throughout their career paths and with relationship building if they are able to speak fluently in a language other than their native language. Being able to speak and understand another language could help with traveling and when working with people whose native language is not the same as theirs. By knowing multiple languages, students will also be able to interact with other students who speak different languages. The inclusion of language studies helps students to unite, cooperate, and learn together. Roger William University's selection of language studies includes French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and many others. Along with the language courses, the university offers programs of study in Latin American Studies and Classical Studies, which discuss society and culture. These opportunities reflect Roger Williams' diversity views because they allow students to broaden their communicational skills, just as Williams' did with the Native Americans.

Roger Williams was the first of the English to act hospitable toward the Native Americans. Rather than acting with hostility, Williams greeted them and showed them kindness. He let them know that he meant no harm and wanted to cooperate safely with them. "For present-day readers, Roger Williams is easier to admire than many of his New England contemporaries. In contrast to other members of the first generation of settlers whose names are bywords for bigotry, Williams is hailed as a prophet of tolerance; in contrast to neighbors who could imagine relations with Indians only in terms of conversion or violence, Williams is celebrated for his efforts to understand the natives of America."⁷ The previous settlers were very threatening towards the Native Americans. They did not give the Native Americans a chance.

⁷ Jonathan Beecher Field, "A Key for the Gate: Roger Williams, Parliament, and Providence," *The New England Quarterly* 80, 2007, 353, accessed February 18th, 2014.

Roger Williams was friendly to them, ultimately creating a positive bond. His logic was that if he could form a relationship with the Native Americans, then they would be able to coexist and cooperate.

Roger Williams University wishes to make every student and faculty member feel comfortable. Instead of treating diverse students differently, the university fosters an inclusive community. Of the many programs on campus, the Diversity Leadership Program stands out for its achievements of emphasizing support, impacting the students' successes in college. Through mentorship, relationship-building, ally development, and extensive leadership development, the Diversity Leadership Program works to strengthen the diversity community. The mentors are among the first to welcome students to campus that are members of the program. These students are able to build relationships with other students who have already completed their first year at Roger Williams University. For some of the new students, this may be their first time joining a community where they may be considered a "minority." The goal of the program is to encourage an early sense of community for underrepresented first year students.

Roger Williams' impact was not only in terms of tolerance of religious and racial difference, but that he created a space where those principles could be put into action.⁸ He valued equality and spent a large portion of his life trying to make meaning of exactly that. As a result of the unfair religious circumstances in England, Williams' set out to find a place where people could practice religion freely and be themselves without having to worry. He tolerated those of all different backgrounds, beliefs, values, and identities. His advocacy is reflected at the university of which his name is remembered, Roger Williams University. Roger Williams' aspiration for diversity is established at Roger Williams University, as it provides opportunity for students of different circumstances and identities to unite. The clubs/organizations, religious

⁸ Ibid, 354.

ceremonies, language course opportunities, programs, events, and more all help the university live up to its namesake's desire to welcome and celebrate diversity.

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