FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: Cultural Proficiency as Cultural Heritage - Hannah Hartman

["Saxifrage" choral music plays, performed by the Fitchburg State University Choirs]

Prof. Kisha Tracy (intro): Welcome to the Fitchburg State University Perseverantia Podcast network. This is the Fitchburg Your Story series in which Fitchburg State students tell the stories that make our city and university unique.

["Saxifrage" fades out]

[vibey bassy music transitions in]

Hannah Hartman: From the 1800s to the mid-1900s, learning disabilities, LDs, and ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, weren't on the public radar. In 1969, Congress passed the first federal law requiring support systems for children with LDs. The 21st century marks a takeoff for awareness in the research of ADHD and LD issues. In an expert review article by Amanda Morin for the Understood Organization, the question is prompted: How have special education law and special education research advanced over the years? In this podcast episode, I hope to explore some of the teaching strategies and educational values that are integral to the cultural heritage of Fitchburg State University.

[vibey bassy music transitions in]

My name is Hannah Hartman, and I've been attending Fitchburg State as a full-time dual enrollment student for the past two years. I'm aware of FSU's reputation as a school with great programs for future educators. Through the university's partnership with my high school, I've been able to participate in many of the future educator opportunities. These opportunities have helped display the cultural heritage of Fitchburg State community as well as the impact on special education.

The conversation I'm hoping to have throughout this episode is an opportunity to foster greater reflection on the transformative impact of inclusive education, ensuring that every voice is heard and every student's needs are met. The most essential thing in a learning environment is the educator. If society can't develop culturally proficient educators, how can we expect society to become culturally proficient? We must have difficult conversations to grow and learn, but that's impossible without diversity.

Anti-bias education is a comprehensive approach to help people learn to challenge stereotyping, bias, and all other forms of discrimination. During a class discussion in EDUC 1005 at Fitchburg State University, the students created a group explanation of diversity in education, stating, diversity helps us be more proficient when we understand the differences between people because we all have different perspectives, and when we communicate, we can learn from each other.

Hannah Hartman (cont'd): The concept of group discussions is an essential part of Fitchburg State's cultural heritage. Differences in communication styles have implications for culturally responsive teaching. Communication skills and cultural competency are crucial components of anti-bias education. I conducted an interview with Dr. William Cortezia a professor of education at Fitchburg State. I prompted the question, "Do you believe that Fitchburg State University is cultural heritage? Why or why not?" In his response, he stated, "Yes, I do. At Fitchburg State University, we have passed down the value of education for over 129 years. Our mission is to provide leadership and support for the economic, environmental, social, and cultural needs of North Central Massachusetts and the Commonwealth while fostering lifelong learning and civic and global responsibility."

He expanded upon this thought, adding how he sees Fitchburg State's cultural heritage emphasized around him. He adds, "Through teaching and learning, a supportive learning environment is created, thus reinforcing our culture. This way, education slash culture goes beyond the classroom".

During my two years as a dual enrollment student with Fitchburg State, I was lucky enough to take a course on culturally responsive educators with Dr. C. And in a course with Dr. C, he introduced our class to an article by Geneva Gay titled, "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching." Culturally responsive teaching is a comprehensive approach emphasizing the importance of challenging stereotyping, bias, and all other forms of discrimination. Teachers must know how to use their cultures and experiences to increase students' academic success and intellectual horizons. Teachers must understand that while caring is required for pedagogy, culturally responsive caring is action-oriented, and so it demonstrates high expectations to ensure academic success in diverse students.

Building a sense of community for diverse students is essential, as many grow up in cultural climates where the group's welfare takes precedence over the individual. Inclusive educators also understand that conflicts between work styles may interfere with academic success and efforts. Therefore, they understand how to form more communal learning environments. Culturally responsive educators help learners realize that knowledge has moral and political impacts that restrain them from taking social action to foster freedom, equality, and justice.

While interventions are based on a child's needs and targeted to improve a specific skill, accommodations, on the other hand, are an adjustment to how a child is learning by modifying teaching strategies and testing structures to support differences in learning and thinking. The reason so many students are left to struggle is the need not to benefit, but to qualify for support to make progress in school.

Hannah Hartman (cont'd): My perception of the vital need for this to change has remained the same and has been developed through a lens of cultural responsiveness through the lessons and courses with multiple professors at Fitchburg State University.

The university itself has taken these values of education beyond class discussions. In a course with Professor Tara Hanley, our class experienced many classroom site visits to observe and study various types of special education classrooms. I gained a lot from these site visits myself. In one of my site visit reflections, I wrote, "Even though the environment was visually welcoming, the classroom lacked the discussions and student interactions that help people form good relationships with their teachers and classmates." My observations were reinforced by the values and strategies I learned in my previous course with Dr. C. Culturally responsive teaching argues that explicit knowledge of cultural diversity is crucial for meeting the educational needs of diverse learners.

The first component of the knowledge base of culturally responsive teaching requires educators to know cooperative problem solving and how diversity affects educational motivation, expectations and performance. How ethnic protocol varies for how children and adults interact and how to implement equitable initiatives in classroom instruction.

To me, one of the most reassuring pieces of evidence that the values the university preaches are believed and valued by the faculty is the switch in the Disability Services Office at Fitchburg State to Simplicity Accommodate. Simplicity Accommodate is an online program that allows students to easily transfer accommodation documents to staff members from course to course and semester to semester. Simplicity, as the name states, simplifies the process of creating and adjusting student accommodations at a university level, while also teaching students how to self-advocate.

The plan of Simplicity is designed to provide support and accommodations that enable children to succeed in school. The plan's main objective is to change the school environment to support others' learning needs. These changes, known as accommodations, may include adjustments to the curriculum, classroom setting changes, and assignments and tests.

Before the implementation of Simplicity Accommodate, the Disability Services Office used a system that led to many inefficiencies in supporting student needs and accommodations.

Simplicity has helped the university administer the values of communication and culturally responsive education into the hands of its students. In an article about the success of Simplicity by Helena Okolicsanyi, she writes, "Accommodate has been instrumental in achieving this goal by providing students with more autonomy in managing their accommodations."

In an interview conducted with Emily Stark of Disability Services, Stark says, "I really love the opportunity for students to be more engaged in the process of disclosing their accommodations

Hannah Hartman (cont'd): to their professors. I love the idea of them doing their semester request. I love it being them choosing and sending to individual people."

Knowing that efforts are made by the staff and faculty of Fitchburg State to help students be more autonomous with their education, as well as expand their awareness and views on the cultural diversity involved in education, is an extremely significant reason why the community of Fitchburg State shares this cultural heritage. By continuing to have these conversations, we as a community can build upon the heritage of Fitchburg State.

I believe that educators have definitely acknowledged and reflected themselves on sort of the consequences and repercussions of all the time spent during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of online learning and self-isolation and quarantine. I think that us as a society having to experience that together brought us together. Because I think it really shed light on some of these other issues and sort of inefficiencies of the way some of the systems are run.

So specifically with the disability services, the systems that were set in place before probably always had their inefficiencies, but it took us having the conversations and having to communicate more with one another, I think that it really helped those people that are at the forefront of the disability services at Fitchburg State to see, okay, we need to make these changes and we need to help the students of Fitchburg State be more autonomous with their education.

[vibey bassy music transitions in]

For me personally, I have had a 504 plan basically my entire life. But after COVID, I really had to learn how to go to those meetings and advocate for myself what I needed from my teachers and what I needed to be successful. And I think that by having these conversations to show that self-advocation is not something you should look down upon, not something that be should be seen as a weakness. Needing help isn't a weakness. I think that communication in education can be normalized to a point that people aren't afraid to ask for help.

With the prominence of social media in today's society, I think that having these conversations has become easier, but also having hateful conversations and thinking you can get away with taking almost the easy way out has become almost normalized in a sense. Think of the way ChatGPT and AI is really taking over education. Having conversations with AI cannot replace having real conversations with other people because we learn from one another. Artificial intelligence learns from human interactions and human behaviors. If we don't have human interactions, intelligence, whether artificial or real, doesn't grow.

And my time at Fitchburg State has really taught me about communicating and advocating and awareness in general. I have become so much more aware that I am not alone in the way that I learn, whether it's by having a conversation with my classmate about not understanding the

Hannah Hartman (cont'd): way a teacher is presenting information. Then I know I'm not alone and by raising my hand and asking that question, I'm not only helping me, but I'm helping the other people that are also confused.

And I think a lot of people don't raise their hand anymore because we're so used to not having to speak out and ask that question. Because you could easily pull up a tab on a Google Meet and look it up. You could easily look up that answer online because we have a whole search engine in the palm of our hands just waiting to be used. But by having conversations, we can teach each other things. We don't need to resort to Google or Safari or Bing or whatever. We can have real discussions and conversations. And as a community, we can learn and grow.

That is what cultural heritage is. Cultural heritage is the traditions, customs, beliefs, interactions of society. And the way that goes on through each generation and each phase of life. And as we

[vibey bassy music transitions in]

grow from children to adults, by having these conversations, we will grow. And so will our cultural heritage.

[vibey bassy music transitions out]

[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

Nikki McToggart: You've been listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Network theme fades out]