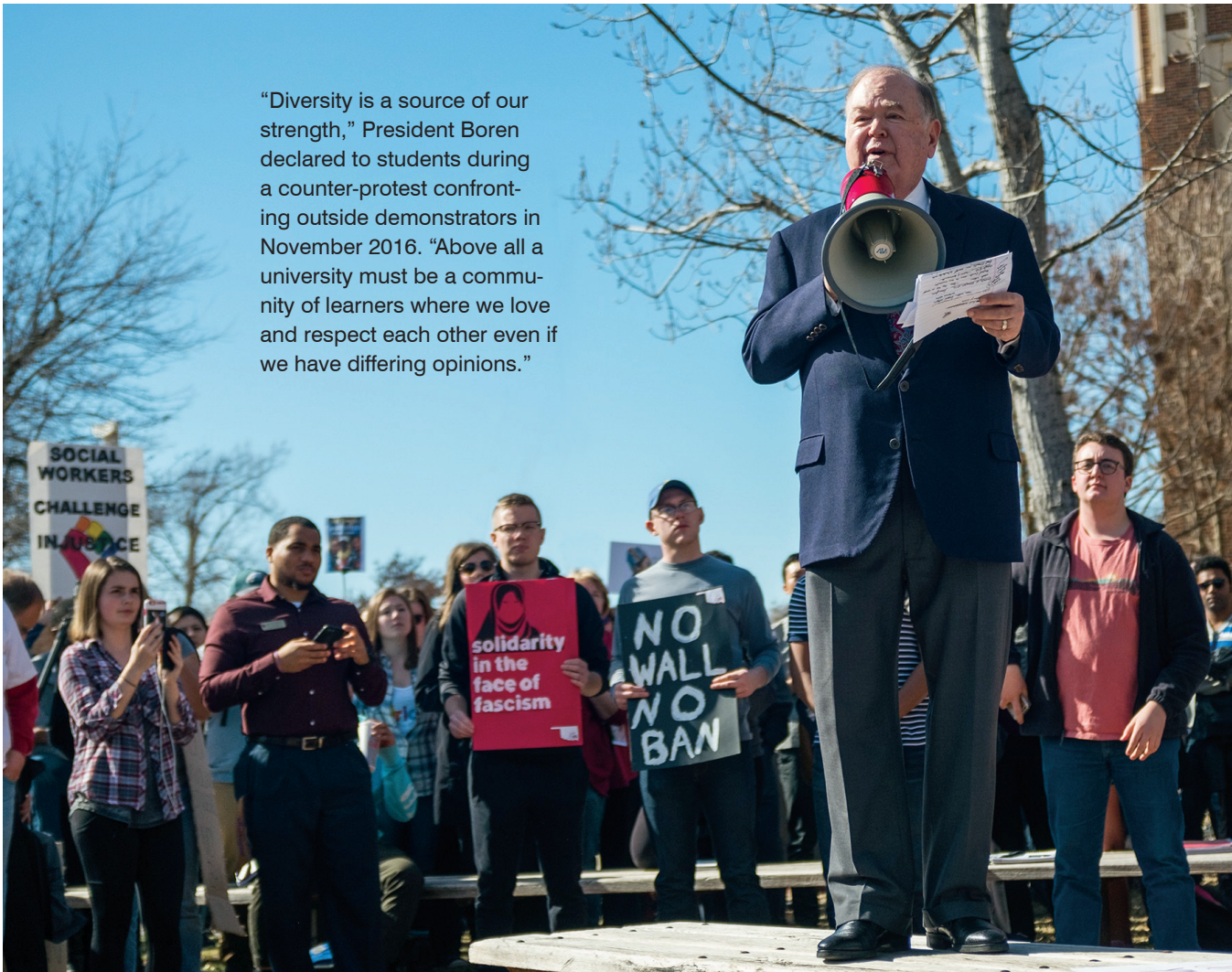


## DIVERSITY

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“Diversity is a source of our strength,” President Boren declared to students during a counter-protest confronting outside demonstrators in November 2016. “Above all a university must be a community of learners where we love and respect each other even if we have differing opinions.”



# Fostering a multicultural campus has been a hallmark of the Boren era

**D**uring his three years on the job with the newly created Office of University Community, Jabar Shumate says the university has seen growth in both retention and graduation rates among under-represented populations on campus.

“It is one thing to recruit students to campus and another to see them through to graduation,” says Shumate.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

“It is hard for students to be away from home, from the cultures they know, and come to a university.”

The Office of University Community oversees all diversity programs on campus and fosters an open and welcoming climate for people, ideas and perspectives, says Shumate. These programs are

designed for faculty, staff and students and highlight such core values as community outreach, collaboration, integrity, cultural awareness and understanding of ethnicities, races, ages, abilities, sexual orientations, religions and class.

The work of creating a multicultural campus that promotes inclusivity has been a cornerstone of President David L. Boren’s nearly quarter-century ten-

ure. From his first days as president when he noticed silos in student housing and re-shuffled dormitory assignments, Boren has worked tirelessly to create a culture of understanding, of family and of inclusion.

Along the way, he met with every dean on all three OU campuses – Norman, Oklahoma City and Tulsa – to explain his plan for taking a comprehensive approach to diversity issues and for creating the position of chief diversity officer.

“Each of our colleges now has diversity officers to ensure that students have access to the kinds of things they actually need to graduate,” says Shumate. “I think this practice has played the most important role in our work to support a diverse student population.”

Services include tutoring, mentoring, academic counseling, career advisement, and internship/post-grad direction support. Some colleges provide additional organizational opportunities that often require the maintenance of a certain GPA and attendance. Although diversity and inclusivity offices vary between colleges, the basic function and objective are the same — to provide wrap-

around student success services.

The Multicultural Engineering Program, which pre-dates the Office of University Community, was one of the first of its kind on campus and is so successful that it was used as a template to create similar programs across campus.

Those efforts took on heightened urgency in March 2015 when a nine-second video of fraternity members singing a racist chant went viral. Boren mobilized, shuttering the fraternity immediately and reaching out to Shumate to return to OU to head up the office he now leads.

“After that experience, when the cameras are away, you had to wonder if the kinds of things we talked about then would actually be put into place,” Shumate says. “I can tell you, three years later we are indeed building a solid foundation for the work that is ongoing and ahead. Not only do we say we have a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion, we are putting the infrastructure in place for that work to happen.”

A roadmap called “Theory of Change” is nearly complete. This systematic method of planning for, participating in, and specifically evaluating a

situation to promote social change is the guideline that OU will use to achieve measurable, desired changes. There are short-, mid- and long-term action steps along the way.

The Office of Student Life also has hosted forums where students can ask their OU peers questions about their culture. Two of these have been, “Ask a Native,” led by the office of American Indian Student Life, and “Trans 101,” conducted by the Gender + Equality Center.

Additionally, each incoming freshman is required to complete the Freshman Diversity Experience by the end of their first year at OU. This five-hour program teaches active listening, the understanding of stereotypes, and promotes empathy.

“We are the only university I can find that actually requires its students to participate in such trainings,” Shumate says. “This program is a tribute to President Boren. Freshman year is the time for understanding that our campus is a family. Individuals of different backgrounds are all part of the experience you will have on this campus. Students know that they matter.”

## Native student dedicated to engineering a brighter future

When you are the lone member of your community living on a campus of thousands, feeling at home might seem impossible. Phrases such as, “We are family” and “You matter” could ring hollow. Raquel Redshirt puts those assumptions to rest.

Redshirt, who goes by Kelly, grew up on the close-knit Navajo reservation in Ship Rock, N.M., where a lack of running water and paved streets was the norm. The thought of pursuing higher education, in engineering no less, was not something Redshirt had ever considered. She grew up with low expectations, she says, until a middle school science fair opened her eyes.

As an eighth grader Redshirt took notice of the many struggles on the reservation, including a lack of electricity. Christmas dinners, she recalls, consisted of prepared food from a local gas station and tortillas cooked over an open fire. The science fair competition motivated Redshirt into action. Like a modern-day Prometheus, the 14-year-old transformed the cooking methods of her people using cardboard boxes,



Navajo Nation member Kelly Redshirt, standing before “Homeward Bound” by the late artist Allan Houser, overcame financial roadblocks and culture shock in her journey toward a 2018 OU environmental engineering degree. Redshirt says the OU Minority Engineering Program was the bridge to her success.

sheep wool, black construction paper, aluminum foil and her imagination.

“I came up with the idea for a homemade solar oven using materials found in a typical household that were low cost and environmentally friendly,” she says. “We needed something that was safe and could be used to cook healthy and nutritious foods at high temperatures.”

Three years and many iterations later, Redshirt was selected to present the final prototype of her solar oven at the National American Science and Engineering Fair in California. She won a Goethe Institute Special Award and traveled to Frankfurt, Germany, where she shared her idea with high school students and teachers across the Atlantic.

That life-changing series of events led Redshirt to the University of Oklahoma, where she is set to graduate with a degree in environmental engineering in May.

“I just knew after my experience with the solar oven that I had to pursue a future that included a way to help my people,” she says. “It’s hard to say what drew me to Oklahoma because I had acceptance letters from other universities. It was probably a gut feeling that this is where I needed to be.”

Yet with all her academic accolades and intellect, the first two semesters were tough. For a young woman who had spent her entire life on a reservation with her family, being away from home was difficult.

“Coming to Norman was a huge culture shock,” Redshirt says. “There was pavement and streets. Just to have a Walmart and a mall was exciting. We did not have any of that at home. Still, I was very, very homesick. Many times, I tried to go home but my parents insisted I stick it out.”

The turning point for Redshirt was her introduction to the Multicultural Engineering Program (MEP) in the Gallogly College of Engineering.

“I don’t know if I would be here today without them,” she says. “They supported me when times were difficult, when I missed my family and my culture. Most of all, MEP taught me how to study. When I got to OU, I just could not do it. I did not know how. And engineering courses are so hard.”

MEP is designed to address the needs of students from underrepresented communities like Redshirt’s. The program, which currently works with more than 180 students, fosters community and inclusivity among students of different cultures and backgrounds. In

addition, MEP provides a vast network of support via tutoring, mentoring, career advisement and coaching to ensure success for its students.

Lisa Morales, executive director of diversity and inclusion for MEP, explains that staff are not academic or financial aid advisers. And they are not counselors, but rather connectors to resources to make sure students have what they need to graduate.

“Our office is like a family away from their families, so we know our students well,” Morales says. “We do talk about the practical aspects of being a student, such as how to study and manage time, but mostly we listen and offer encouragement. MEP is a place to go and feel supported.”

With the support of MEP, Redshirt is looking forward to graduation and has accepted a full-time position with an engineering firm in Farmington, N. M., where she will work as a civil engineer. Her goal is to focus on water resources – a major issue for her people – and ultimately to attend graduate school.

While a number of tribal organizations exist on OU’s campus and Redshirt is a member of a Native American sorority, she says she is one of only three members of the Navajo Nation that she knows of at the university. At first, this distinction made her uncomfortable. But not anymore.

“I take it as an honor to be a voice for my people,” she says. “College is a place out of the ordinary and while I have received a great education, I have learned even more about myself. I feel comfortable in Norman and I absolutely love it. President Boren emphasizes that we are a family and OU is definitely that. I may be returning to my home, but I will always be a Sooner.”

*Susan Grossman is the director of development for the Myriad Botanical Gardens in Oklahoma City and a freelance writer living in Norman.*