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Where our diversity campaign fails

APRIL 1, 2016 BY COLE WHITE

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BY COLE WHITE | Opinion Editor |

Every time I walk through Kirby something catches my eye, something that has always slightly bothered me.

That would be the slideshow of our school diversity campaign.

If you aren't familiar, I'll explain it to you.

It's the campaign that features people of different ethnic and social backgrounds brandishing signs while the text says "You may think because I'm (blank) that I (blank), but actually (blank)."

My problem is that I've always imagined these people saying it to me in person, and it has a less powerful effect.

If a person walked up to me and said, earnestly, "You might think because I'm Asian I know karate...", my response would honestly be "No I don't, that's a dumb thing to think."

The flaw in the campaign is that it scrapes the bottom of the barrel of stereotypes to try to illustrate a point, and it ultimately falls flat. It poses the idea that gays are absorbed by fashion, African Americans grow up on welfare, Asians are always good at math, etc. These are the things that we already accept as ignorant stereotypes. Then it attempts to pull the rug out from under us as if our minds are about to be blown.

It's insulting to everyone involved.

The karate one in particular bothered me because I don't know a single person who honestly believes that all Asians know martial arts. If we're going to reach that low, we might as well put up slides saying all Mexicans are illegal immigrants stealing jobs or that all African Americans love fried chicken and watermelon. It's already at that level, so why not go all the way?

Beyond that, some of them are outright confusing.

For example, one slide boldly states that while, as an Asian, you may think he receives great grades, but he's actually barely passing his classes. There's nothing like straight D's to stick it to racists!

My personal favorite is that you may think that because a guy is in a fraternity he gets drunk all the time, but he's actually never been drunk. Because if there's one historically long-suffering, marginalized minority, it's Greek life. Right?

Diversity should be addressed through celebration, not lazy conflict.

Now, before you cry "white privilege," I'll acknowledge what I am. I'm a straight, white, protestant, American male. I drew a royal flush for identity in our country. I'm the type of person this campaign is aimed at, so maybe I'm not the person to speak to this. Maybe this campaign is what UMD needs.

I will say that if UMD needs to start this low to address diversity, we have a much more serious problem.

If we honestly need a hand on our shoulder and a voice saying "Come on guys, not every homosexual is a snappy dresser" or "Listen up gang, not every African American grew up on welfare" then I won't just apologize for my previous rant. I'll feel sorry for UMD. If this is where we have to start, it's going to take a hell of a lot more than a slideshow to fix.

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