While high school wasn’t his thing, speaking out and seeking positive changes regarding diversity was. Thanks to his undergraduate experiences, Dr. Kenneth B. Durgans, Assistant Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at IUPUI, is now an advocate for diversifying and improving Indianapolis as a community. His academic and professional expertise is focused on cross-cultural communication and diversity issues. He is the campus advisor to student organizations and actively serves on an array of community service organization boards.

**Learning Center and Support Groups**

Hailing from Springfield, Ohio, Durgans received his B.A. in history and political science from Baldwin Wallace College, a small private liberal arts college in Berea, Ohio with 3,500 students, where he went to play basketball and run track. He felt fortunate to get accepted because he was not a stellar student in high school, so for the first year of college he spent many hours in the learning center and relied heavily on his peers.

The learning center was set up to provide students with an opportunity to upgrade their skills (a lot of attention placed on math, reading, and reading comprehension). Those who participated in the center’s programs showed higher GPAs paired with higher graduation rates. “[The center] had a lot of parallels to IUPUI’s University College,” Durgans said, “which is why I’m so connected to what goes on there, and I’ve been very impressed.”

Durgans knows that not every student comes into college at the top of his or her class and understands how important it is to spend time reaching out to “average” students to show them ways to improve their skills and grades to retain their spot at IUPUI. “The age-old success mechanisms for getting students to graduation are to monitor [them]” and keep hands-on with them, Durgans explained.

The group Durgans entered college with was one of the first large groups of African American students. Therefore, they quickly became campus activists and protested for things that weren’t available to students of color. “[College] was interesting because I was a part of the first wave of students who were diversifying the campus,” Durgans said.

Durgans attributes his success in school and later in life to the people with which he surrounds himself. While many people would not have bet on Durgans succeeding, his parents and friends did. Between support from family and friends, the academic support provided by the learning center, and outlets such as sports and activism, Durgans was able to find his voice and put his competitive side to good use.

**Activism**

“The activism and the experience of [being in] an environment that wasn’t ready for you and navigating through that were essential to what I’m doing now because I really felt at the end of my education [that] giving back to other students was something I wanted to do,” stated Durgans.

Durgans’ activism played a major role in shaping events that ultimately led him to his current position. “I spent so much time in the dean of students’ office protesting and discussing things with him,” Durgans said. “He ended up being the person who really shaped me and pushed me in the direction of education” and college administration. “I didn’t know anything about college administration or how you got to it – and there still isn’t a map,” Durgans said. “But it shaped the relationships I had, and it gave me confidence that I can navigate any environment, and I haven’t looked back since.”

Often times the protests Durgans was involved in were in response to name calling, but the discussions with the dean dealt with the lack of resources that were culturally specific to Durgans. “It’s not that we didn’t do things with other folks, but there were times when we wanted to do things that we were used to doing (and we didn’t have the resources).”

Durgans and his peers helped diversify the options available to students, specifically educational programs. They brought in speakers that offered different opinions and perspectives. Durgans pushed toward diversifying the faculty and staff at Baldwin because at the time there was not one African American teacher on campus and very few African American staff members. “It was the same things I am doing now,” Durgans said, “diversifying the campus to better suit students from all cultures.”

Durgans “always believed the one thing that was healthy about that era from a student’s perspective” – and that he believes is vitally important to maintain today – was “encouraging[ing] students to speak up. Always be open to that and don’t run away from it because to me it is a sign of a healthy institution – to have an environment where people [can] talk about things that they disagree with. And do it proactively – [to] seek out and be ahead of the game with respect to the environment of these issues.” Durgans said.

To be proactive and not reactive is the best practice according to Durgans. “[The dean at Baldwin] started to become more proactive and anticipate by being in contact with the students,” Durgans said. “We set up committees and dialogues so that we could discuss things in advance.”

**A Give and Take with Indianapolis**

Durgans' job impacts everyone because diversity is a part of everything. It impacts internally (IUPUI) and externally (in the city and greater Indianapolis area). People in the diversity office work on supporting student organizations (student senate, social justice positions, etc.). Two offices specific to diversity are the Multicultural Success Center, dealing with most of the minority students and the organizations they have on campus, and Adaptive Educational Services, which assists students with varying disabilities.

Having groups and clubs focused on diversity are essential to the campus and city as it allows for students, faculty, staff, and community members to have a place on campus where they have support from people that understand their perspective. “It’s important to strengthen your ability to negotiate across cultural lines. If I’m comfortable at IUPUI as an African American, then I’m going to [get] involved in [campus activities]” and that will carry over to participation in community activities as well, Durgans said. “We have so many groups that bring something really attractive to Indianapolis, and as you diversify and bring more people in from different areas, it helps the transitions to the community, and therefore, strengthens the community.”

According to Durgans it is essential that there is a give and take relationship between IUPUI and the community. He believes it is IUPUI’s function to enhance the city by producing the best students and the best research. A city has to have a strong institution that provides the population with educated people so that the level of expertise is raised in the community in order to attract more businesses.

Durgans believes that IUPUI’s primary function is to produce the best students and that diversity is one of the mechanisms that will help make that happen. A successful city needs to be a place that is conducive to and welcomes diversity so that people from around the world will want to work there and push the product lines.

For Durgans, diversity draws in a global workforce, and then the industry is kept going as people bring their unique creativity and diverse perspectives to push the envelope in the production of ideas and goods.