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Dear Colleague:

The University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota are much alike, and yet the slogans under which they hope to propel themselves into the future are radically different: our "Design for Diversity" vs. their "Commitment to Focus." It goes without saying that a major state university has to be committed to both. Let me illustrate with a classroom example. An instructor often makes the following comment on a student's work: "You are all over the place. You need a greater commitment to focus." On the other hand, equally often s/he writes: "Your perspective is too narrow. You need to consider other points of view." Focus and diversity are both intellectual virtues. Nevertheless, a subtle difference exists: focus suggests more strongly intellectual excellence, diversity more strongly political virtue. Political thinkers have noted a tension between these two ideals. A university has the difficult task of trying to resolve the tension, or, at least, make it work for its own purposes.

Mediocrity. How can I turn it into excellence? My landscapes are neither bad nor good: they are simply mediocre. Now, suppose I change the title of one of my poorly rendered landscapes from (say) "Autumn" to "Mediocre," won't the painting then suddenly seem excellent? It is no longer an unsuccessful attempt at representing a segment of nature--and any critic who persists along that line of evaluation will be deemed a philistine. By changing the title, my painting is suddenly transformed into a highly successful attempt at expressing mediocrity: every brush stroke--its feebleness triumphant over good intention--enforces that feeling. A viewer, exposed to my work, will feel his spirit turn into gray mush as he confronts its perfectly expressed, brutal realism. How is that for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat?

Suppose I write an essay on "Excellence." It doesn't come off. I change the title into "Mediocrity." Alas, victory still eludes me. Why? Answer: painting expresses and represents, language represents and expresses--a subtle but important difference.

Best wishes--and enjoy the summer,

