At this year’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Faculty-Staff In-Service David Pilgrim asked if I would read a story. Although the theme was family I chose to share a story from last year’s graduation. For me the university has been an extended family for nearly thirty-five years. The nature of academia is that the position is never 9-5 and the lines between work and family are continually blurred and combined. Thus I thought this story appropriate for the occasion.

"Who Knew?" the proud African woman asked her assembled classmates and families at graduation. Her story was a special one. Married to an Air Force Officer she had begun her college career in 1975 at a Troy State University branch in Montgomery, Alabama. Although not readily apparent, we had much in common. I had begun my college teaching career that same year at Troy State University, so I understood some of the educational challenges and barriers she had faced.

Here she was twenty-eight years later earning her degree in criminal justice from Weber State University. But her story was far more compelling. Who knew? She repeated to the audience, continuing with her special story.

Who knew that a black woman from Alabama would discover the meaning of her culture and heritage in the most improbable of places... Utah, a state not normally perceived as diverse as others by some measures. Two faculty, a Hispanic psychology instructor and an English professor of Asian background through their coursework and personal interest, had encouraged and helped her to explore and understand the unique nature of her African American heritage and of the black experience in America.

And there she stood in front of her fellow graduates, proud both of her heritage and accomplishments. Much of higher education dialogue frequently talks of diversity in terms of numbers and percentages. This approach's focus on statistics, while well intentioned and generally useful in achieving improved diversity numbers, sometimes means we forget can mask the true personal and educational value and meaning of a diverse campus environment and the very positive difference this can make for our students.

In hiring those two faculty we never imagined it might result in that special graduation day. But the lesson and value of diversity is that it pays dividends far beyond what we may imagine. It can create a positive impact on students for years and years to come. In working for and creating a diverse campus we never know when our decisions will help to create that next special graduation day.

Indeed, who knew?