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How Cultural Diversity Will Shape Your Career

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HOW CULTURAL DIVERSITY WILL SHAPE YOUR CAREER

by Anne Austin

Our Increasingly Diverse Population Offers Us the Opportunity to Explore Our **Differences** and Build on Our Similarities.

Imagine that you are sitting in your school auditorium. The woman on stage asks everyone female to stand up. They do, and the rest of the audience applauds. Then everyone who is an eldest child stands up. More applause. Then everyone Catholic. Then twins, vegetarians, kids whose parents are divorced, anyone left-handed, anyone bilingual, anyone who likes pepperoni pizza. The applause goes on and on as students pop up and down. That's the name of this event: "Up/Down." It's used as an icebreaker at the "Make a Change" program presented at Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama.

How many times would you have stood up? Make a list of all the groups you belong to. Now, try something harder. Let's say you didn't stand up with the twins, the vegetarians, or the left-handers. Can you, nevertheless, find something you have in common with someone who is a twin, a vegetarian, or a leftie? Perhaps you both play the cello? Or you both like baseball or playing chess?

In a nutshell, that's what diversity is all about. BY RECOGNIZING OUR SIMILARITIES AS WELL AS OUR **DIFFERENCES**, WE CAN BUILD COMMUNITY AND FIND POINTS OF UNDERSTANDING.

DIVERSITY AT SCHOOL

The numbers make it clear: Diversity is a fact. Out of 270 million Americans, 33 million are over age 65. Twenty-five million are foreign-born. Of those 25 million, almost 3 million are under age 19. Right now a quarter of the U.S. population is African-American, Hispanic, or Asian-American. By the year 2010, that share will grow to a third, and to a half by the year 2050. No matter where you live, chances are good that the increasing diversity of the American population enriches your life.

You probably experience **cultural** diversity in your daily school life. Many high schools have written their mission statements to celebrate the diversity of their student bodies. Instead of using **differences** as a way to avoid getting to know other people, exploring those **differences** through open and honest communication can be a way to build new friendships. Teens across the country show it can be done.

Teens at Anacortes High School in Washington founded a group called "Teens Reaching Out for Harmony." Using on-line video conferencing, they talk regularly with students at Garfield High School in San Diego. They discuss their feelings on issues of race and tolerance in America and current world problems. You can be sure the students find plenty to talk about.

At Renton High School in the Seattle area, requests from students and parents led to a multicultural history course. The school is one of the most diverse in the area. It has a student population that is 38 percent African-American, 34 percent Caucasian, 22 percent Asian, 8 percent Hispanic, and 2 to 3 percent Native American. The course's teacher intentionally takes advantage of that rich diversity to teach her class. One of the main goals of the class is to teach open-mindedness and tolerance, says Syd Reider, the course's teacher. "This is a very valuable course for the world we live in."

In the Chicago area, families are getting ready for a unique exchange program. Sponsored by the 4-H clubs, the program brings Japanese students ages 12 to 18 to the United States and sends American students to Japan.

Teens not only teach each other about diversity; they can teach adults. A Houston community group selected teens to represent Houston's many **cultural** groups at a diversity conference. The adults wanted to see the issues from the teens' point of view.

DIVERSITY IN COLLEGE

Most students go off to college looking forward to making new friends from different places. More and more students view college as preparation for taking their places in the "global village." Record numbers of American students are studying abroad--about 10 percent of the undergraduate population. Some schools encourage foreign study. For example, as many as 94 percent of undergraduates at St. Olaf College in Minnesota have studied abroad.

The number of foreign students studying in the United States has also increased. Big city schools tend to attract a lot of foreign students. New York University, Boston University, and UCLA enrolled the most. But smaller schools in the Midwest also welcome students from other countries. Andrews (Michigan), Beloit (Wisconsin), Grinnell (Iowa), and Goshen (Indiana) enroll high percentages of foreign students.

DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

For many American businesses, understanding how **cultural** diversity is reshaping the workplace has been difficult. The 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in hiring, firing, or compensation, or in the terms, conditions, or privileges of employment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or gender. But some companies have complied with this law only after being sued.

Just three years ago, Texaco faced a major discrimination lawsuit that caused the company's market value to drop nearly a billion dollars in a few days. The damage to the company's pocketbook and reputation led to a complete overhaul of its personnel practices. Texaco completely changed the way it hired, retained, and promoted women and minorities. The pay and promotion of managers responsible for making these new programs work were linked directly to the progress they made. Texaco's CEO said, "I [am] going to use this as an opportunity to make us a better company."

Fortunately, it doesn't always take a lawsuit to make a company catch on. Smart companies recognize that doing the right and legal thing makes good business sense, that diversity translates into dollars. For instance:

- Women decide how to spend more than 50 percent of every consumer dollar.
- Fifty percent of all discretionary income, about \$800 billion, is in the hands of the elderly.
- The African-American market spends \$450 billion; the Latino market spends \$380 billion. Both segments are growing at a faster rate than the American market overall.

McDonald's ran ads showing African-American families celebrating Kwanza; Sears launched an entire ad campaign focused on African-Americans. Wal-Mart advertises to Hispanics in the days between Christmas and New Year's because that group celebrates Three Kings Day on January 6. Insurance companies advertise in Asian markets; AT&T runs separate ads to attract Vietnamese and Japanese customers. IBM and BellSouth have used the diversity of their workforces as a selling point in their advertising.

The shift to multicultural advertising illustrates that companies see what's changing in the marketplace. They're also learning that diversity doesn't just affect their customers; it also plays a role in the workplace. To improve their competitiveness, companies such as Honeywell and General Motors have made diversity initiatives a priority. And it pays off. The companies on FORTUNE magazine's list of the top 50 companies with good work environments for minorities outperformed the general marketplace.

For-profit employers aren't the only ones who deal with diversity. The public service sector has realized that in order to serve the community, it has to mirror the community. The police force in Lincoln, Nebraska, has hired two Vietnamese interpreters to handle interactions with the growing Vietnamese community and to provide **cultural** training to its personnel.

The same need for education and community-building has occurred in the health profession. Doctors and nurses take classes in medical Spanish and learn how different cultures view illness. In the Chicago area, the "Walk in My Shoes" program provides a glimpse into life as a senior citizen. Participants wear glasses with scratched, yellow lenses to simulate poor eyesight; they try to open pill bottles while wearing gloves; and they listen to distorted cassettes that simulate the sensation of hearing loss.

DIVERSITY IN YOUR LIFE

The experience of diversity is a little like choosing what you will have for lunch every day. There's nothing wrong with turkey on wheat, but after a while it gets boring. Why not try an enchilada or hot and sour soup? Add some variety to your lunch and to your life right now:

- Don't get stuck in that trap of thinking one person can't make a difference. **YOU CAN CHANGE YOURSELF** by making a conscious decision to incorporate diversity into your life. That might be as simple as trying out different foods. If your town doesn't have any ethnic restaurants, your library has cookbooks. You can learn a lot from preparing and eating new foods.
- Go to an international night at your school--or get together with your friends to create one. Churches, community colleges, and civic groups sponsor multicultural events. The same organizations also host visitors. Volunteer to show them around your town.
- Make friends with someone who has a different ethnic background. Don't worry about feeling stupid or silly. A genuine desire to learn about someone else's background is always a positive.
- Consider going on a student exchange program. Living in a different setting teaches you a lot about that culture and even more about yourself.

DIVERSITY AND YOUR FUTURE

Diversity can enrich your life in many ways.

- **COLLEGE:** Think about a study-abroad program. If your school does not have its own program, you can probably get college credit on another school's study-abroad program. Remember to consult with your advisor before you apply. Whether or not you study abroad, take foreign language and history courses.

- WORK: Keep an eye on companies that rank high as good places for minorities and women. These companies are better places to work for everyone because they value their employees as people.

Diversity adds new dimensions to traditional jobs. You could be an engineer and find yourself on a project with team members from all over the world. Diversity is also creating all sorts of new opportunities for workers who are adaptable to new environments, the ones companies call "change agents." You could be a diversity manager who comes up with new ways for people to communicate.

Change is here. Make sure you're ready!

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GO ON-LINE TO LEARN MORE

If you're interested in a **cultural** exchange program, you can start your search at the following Web sites:

- www.worldlearning.org (founded in 1932 as the Experiment in International Living; offers three-to-five-week summer home stays for high school students)

- www.afs.org (began in 1914 after the outbreak of World War I as the Friends Volunteer Ambulance Service, now the American Field Service; offers summer and year-long exchanges)

- www.youthforunderstanding.com (offers summer, semester, and academic year study-abroad programs; also links to scholarship sources)

For college-level study-abroad programs, go to www.worldwide.edu or www.studyabroad.com.

Check the Peace Corps' site (www.peacecorps.gov) for returning volunteers' stories about their experiences. "Kids World" features stories about kids (of all ages) who have made a difference.

Web pages of advocacy groups are a good place to learn about current issues. Usually they have good links. Try:

- www.ajcongress.org (American Jewish Congress--uses the legal system to fight bigotry)

- www.naacp.org (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)

- www.nativeweb.org/ (links to sites about indigenous people)

- www.now.org (National Organization for Women--under "Key Issues," click on "Racial and Ethnic Diversity" or "Women-Friendly Workplace" to pick up news stories)