

## Diversity: the Maestro of Innovation

The United States has never been monochromatic. Sometimes the clash of colors has been ugly. Despite the conflict, I believe diversity is one of America's greatest advantages. Anyone who truly wants to understand the chaos and beauty in our world needs to listen to the symphony of ideas and opinions produced by a diverse population. As a member of a majority-minority generation, I have the chance to hear that symphony, but first I have to move beyond Westport "bubble." This town is insulated from much of America's diversity, essentially limiting our tolerance for others and impeding our understanding of the controversies in life.

A liberal New England suburb, Westport is not a place where you would necessarily expect to find racism. Most residents would likely be proud to proclaim they would *never* discriminate. And yet, prejudice is visible. Sometimes, it's downright obvious. A Staples soccer fan once decided to make a Facebook event page for the boys' game against Norwalk. Five hours later there were 335 posts, and few of them had anything to do with soccer. Instead, scraps of racist trash talk littered the page. Taunts about Hispanic Norwalk students only having a future in lawn mowing. Mock-warnings about the danger of catching STDs in the Norwalk bleachers.

Some might call this an aberration; surely the majority of Staples would have nothing to do with that kind of bigotry. That's probably true, but I believe those posts are simply egregious examples of a subtle and more pervasive bias. Bias that convinced my friend she should stay in the car until a passing black man was 30 yards away. Bias that laughed at a story someone told about the "scary Muslim" at the airport who was "definitely" planning to blow up the plane.

Growing up in a town that is 93% white, Westport teens haven't cultural exposure that would back the egalitarian ideals taught in history class and encouraged by our community. Instead, our relative lack of interaction means many cultures remain unfamiliar to us, and humans tend to fear the unknown. Studies of brain activity actually found that people from

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racially uniform areas respond to seeing other skin colors like they would respond to a physical threat. That's a definite problem, since my peers and I are going to be citizens of a country where over half the population isn't white. We can't have an alarm ringing in the back of our mind whenever we see dark skin. It's our challenge to overcome that prejudice. If it persists, it will not only lead us to act unfairly, but also impair our education by isolating us from the rich resource that is America's diversity.

That isolation would be seriously damaging because diversity is the best path to new ideas and unique perspectives. Studies about brainstorming have shown that the most effective solutions are produced by collaboration between people from different walks of life. Diverse groups consider a wider range of ideas and deliberate more carefully, resulting in the most comprehensive responses.

That's why elite colleges across the country grant sizeable scholarships to attract students with all kinds of backgrounds; the variety adds a richness to the college campuses that can't be achieved any other way. No matter how good the teacher or curriculum, many subjects are up for interpretation, demanding debate between different opinions. When there is more than one right answer, the best education introduces as many different answers as possible. I think Staples' classes present a lot of the right questions, but the dearth of diversity means there are perspectives I've never heard.

Have I gotten into heated debates in my classes? Yes. So I have definitely met students whose beliefs differ from mine. But my school is mostly white and mostly rich. A lot of us have had similar life experiences. The limited variety of ideas is inevitable. I once got a taste of the ideas I'm missing when I discussed education reform with my friend Lamesa. She's Bangladeshi and attends school in Norwalk, a more diverse setting than Westport. She told me she felt that a

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major issue with the American school system is the competitive “get on top” mindset. She believes placing more emphasis on morals would bring returns in productivity and social stability. The idea was new to me, fascinating and blindsiding. I had previously felt informed about matters of education, but she made me realize I had mostly listened to the opinions of white educators and white students. There was definitely variation within those groups, but how could I possibly have a well-rounded opinion when there are so many I haven’t heard from?

As a person that loves to learn, the prospect of encountering those new perspectives when I leave Westport is exhilarating. It’s not that I haven’t enjoyed Staples; my teachers have taught me to read closely and write meaningfully and persist through difficult problems. But real life goes deeper than that; it’s about appreciating the beautiful and confronting the ugly and doing your best to answer impossible questions. I don’t think I can really complete an education in life until I join bigger, more varied conversations. America’s diversity means access to cultures and traditions and ideas from every corner of the globe.

It’s a little like being able to hit new keys on a piano, shifting your hands and stretching your fingers so you can play in different octaves. Everyone starts in the middle C position. It’s easy and comfortable and you learn the basic skills. But all the interesting music, the songs with real power, make you strain for the high G and stretch for that low F. Entering a majority-minority world is like starting to reach for those far-off notes. It will be a challenge, unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but ultimately it will open up a whole new book of music. No one wants to be stuck playing “Mary Had Little Lamb.” Taught by the maestro of diversity, I hope to learn Mozart and Vivaldi.

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### Works Cited

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