

Friendship Through a Shared Love of Tennis

This past September, I moved into my new dorm room for my first year at boarding school. Going to a new school gave me a rare chance to view a school dining hall, and the social structure it exemplifies, from the outside. I saw tables that had a mix of races, epitomizing the diversity for which my school prides itself – black, white, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern students all sitting together in a lively conversation. Yet I also noticed tables that were predominately one race – Chinese nationals speaking in rapid Mandarin; a cluster of white hockey players lounging near the back wall. Despite the school's many and various efforts, there was still self-segregation apparent even to the unfamiliar eye. I believe that my school's progress in fostering diversity can be applied to American schools more generally, and the pockets of self-segregation that remain are a telling sign of the tougher barriers yet to be overcome.

I believe that much of the diversity and racial mixing in my school's dining hall comes ultimately from friendships through shared interests. People sit with their friends at lunch, and friends can be made through shared passions, activities, and sports, but also through shared customs, traditions, language, and just plain looking alike. Self-segregation occurs when these latter similarities are more readily available than the former ones; if it is easier to befriend other Hispanic students than to find fellow bookworms, self-segregated tables will doubtless emerge. In this respect, Westport students can make a real impact in decreasing segregation in the lunchroom. Putting a greater emphasis on clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities and encouraging others to get involved with their passions are surefire ways to break down racial barriers in your and others' social networks.

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However, a key ingredient must be present for this emphasis on shared interests to produce tangible results. Interracial friendships must be encouraged and valued at least as much as intraracial ones. It would do no good to the cause of desegregating the dining hall if students began befriending others sharing common interests – and a common ethnicity as well. The most immediately successful way in which my boarding school encourages these friendships is unfortunately one that most schools cannot adopt: admitting a diverse student body. With a third of the students identifying as students of color, minorities do not stand out as “other”. It becomes easier to forget about race when you see such a wide variety of ethnicities every day. I feel that even my short time at my new school has helped me become more “colorblind”, in a sense. While I still notice skin color when I meet new people, I do not form snap stereotype judgments. And with my friends, I do not even notice skin color at all. However, while this racial diversity is something to strive for, unfortunately, particular circumstances sometimes make it unable to be fully achieved.

Many neighborhoods in America are self-segregated, including Westport, which is over 90 percent Caucasian. While boarding schools and colleges have the luxury of an admissions process, schools in Westport and across America have their racial makeup determined by that of their city, often to ill effect. A change to this residential segregation is needed, but there are much easier, smaller-scale changes that students can pragmatically put into effect to encourage interracial friendships. Educating the student body on specific ethnic customs of minority groups – such as Kwanzaa, or wearing a hijab – would help to break interracial boundaries that are

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based on ignorance. Barriers of ignorance also exist between those of different sexual orientation, and talks encouraging understanding and acceptance would help greatly in breaking down these boundaries. Screening films highlighting interracial friendships and strong racial or sexual minority leads, such as the *Harold and Kumar* films, provides a more subtle, but likely more well-attended, nudge toward diversity. Glorification of interracial friendships and stereotype-breaking will lead, slowly but surely, to a real decrease in self-segregation in the lunchroom.

My boarding school has put into practice many of the measures I have mentioned. Of course, more of these programs would help overcome self-segregation in the dining hall, but I believe that it is time for my school to address the deeper, tougher issues that remain as yet unchallenged. The fact remains that many sports and activities are associated with a particular race. The rowing and hockey teams at my school are predominately white; the math team is almost entirely Chinese; our Step Squad is 95% black. My school already encourages sports and extracurricular activities to a great degree; the most successful way for it to overcome the remaining self-segregation in its social structure is to dispel the stereotypes associated to these activities. I suggest a short, open “trial” period for sports and clubs in which students are encouraged to try as many as possible. It would be much more successful than a club fair in dispelling stereotypes and helping students find their interests without bias.

This attempt to break racial barriers through shared interests, like all vast efforts at change, comes with its risks. The benefits are clear – a more racially mixed social setting allows for greater sharing of diverse experiences, a quell in racial

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tensions that have been at the forefront of the nation's mind in recent months, and a better experiential education about race for us students. Yet there was a reason for self-segregation – shared culture, traditions, and experiences – that we may risk losing. Is ethnic heritage not something we should remember and pride? Does it risk becoming lost in the “ideal” melting-pot of the American cafeteria? I believe this will not happen. I believe that in this “ideal” cafeteria toward which we strive, ethnicity will become a shared connection, but not a divisive one, bringing people together much like an interest in physics or Shakespeare. It will not cause the soccer team to self-segregate into racially homogenous groups of friends; instead, it will be yet another of those attributes that help us connect to friends and define each of us uniquely as a person.

In this essay, I have related a variety of programs that students at my school and others can put in effect to overcome self-segregation in the cafeteria. Encouraging friendships through shared interests, and not shared skin color, is the focal point that all these efforts have in common. I believe that my school succeeds in its mission to have a diverse student body not when the admissions department enrolls a multicultural freshman class, but when, sophomore year, a Chinese National and a black student from Nigeria decide to room together, best friends through a shared love of tennis. This is the example we should follow to desegregate our cafeterias. This is diversity.