

Eat and Meet

People are naturally drawn to those who are similar to them, whether it be socially, emotionally, or physically. This has been prevalent throughout history, helping to shape our modern society today. And yet, there is no place in which the need to segment our peers into groups and find our place among them seems more true than a cafeteria in a high school. Teenagers search for comfort, so while the cafeteria should be a place where students should feel comfortable familiarizing themselves with others from varying backgrounds and with different experiences and viewpoints, it instead becomes a place of self-division based on those very differences.

Often times, the barriers that separate factions of the student body are purely superficial. For what reason do minority groups, based on race or background, tend to 'stick together' at lunch, or do majority groups exclude them? The answer is simple: because people are comfortable with people who are easy to identify as being similar and with whom they perceive have common experiences. For example, if a white student from Westport walked into the cafeteria and saw two tables, one with seven African American students and one with seven white students, it is almost inevitable that the student would occupy the eighth seat at the second table. This typical choice happens only because of the common perception that people of our same race act and communicate the same way we do.

Despite my eclectic background, as I am both Irish and Egyptian by descent, these barriers apply to me as well. Because I am both light skinned and have lived in a town that is 93% white (based on [Westportct.gov](http://Westportct.gov)) for my entire life, I am only familiar with the predominantly white, New England suburb culture that defines Westport. Therefore I

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am very aware that if that same experiment was performed with me as the student, I too would migrate to the culture that I believe I know best, and I would sit down with other white students.

Although race and ethnicity do play a huge role in students' seating choices at lunch, they are not the only factors. Often times, students divide themselves up by interests, whether in relation to academics or extra-curricular activities. By this I mean that those who are generally interested in and play sports tend to separate themselves from those who are members of the choir, for example. This fraction among the student body is as unhealthy as division by race, because the less time one spends with people who have other interests, the more that interest seems distant and foreign and the more likely one is to perceive differences between themselves and others.

As an athlete (I play football and basketball), I am aware of the general stereotypes of both the 'athlete group,' and the other groups around the school. However, I know from experience that for the most part, these stereotypes are blatantly untrue. My brother is heavily involved in Staples Players, the acting group at our high school, as well as Orphenians, the choir. As a result, I have become acquaintances and developed friendships with many of his friends. While this may seem like not much of a big deal, it has allowed me to become comfortable around 'Players kids' in general, and has caused me to see how similar we all are. Unfortunately, based on my experiences with many of my 'athlete' friends, other students may not see these similarities and may choose to stereotype negatively those kids who are interested in arts, science or any number of different areas.

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The lack of healthy interaction among students who are separated by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or even differences in interests leads me to a very plausible school-wide solution that would familiarize people with each other.

In order to increase both unity and familiarity among the student body, especially in the cafeteria, I propose that students sit at tables grouped by the period and class during which lunch takes place one day a week. Since class enrollment cuts across all of the factors that separate us, this would provide the opportunity for students to strike up conversations with ‘different’ people every week and hopefully develop new friendships and get past their stereotypes. While it may have to be enforced by the school during the beginning stages of this policy, I believe students will eventually begin to not only enjoy the opportunity to converse with other students, but also look forward to the experience. Just as an ‘athlete’ like myself enjoys talking about the newest play or choir performance, an actor at Staples would most likely care to hear about the success of our robotics team. In addition, by definition, this grouping would break through any segmenting of students based on race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

As for myself, I intend to incorporate more diversity among the people I eat lunch with every day. This is not to say that I will abandon the friends I currently have, but instead that I will try to reach out to those around me in order to help me broaden my perspective on the Staples student body. I plan to do this by sitting at tables that have people of a different ‘crowd’ than I am in, or happen to have more people of a different ethnicity. Further, I will bring along a friend or two of mine, which will accomplish two things: one being that I will be a bit more comfortable at first, knowing that I am not

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completely alone, and the other being that my friends will hopefully learn something new about a different students, too.

In the end, I see it as crucial that Staples students become more familiar with the different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and interests that span the student body, in order to increase friendliness and interaction among them, to maximize the value of the Staples education, and to make Staples graduates more productive members of society.