

# *The People You Meet Along The Way*

# 13

DIVERSITY





John transferred from a small, southern community college to a major metropolitan university located in the Northeast. He had been an average student, graduating from a relatively small, rural high school. He had attended elementary, middle, and high school for 12 years with many of the same people. He had excelled at sports and had difficulty deciding on a major. He chose to enroll at the local community college to get some basic courses out of the way and to establish a career path. There he decided that engineering was to be his career. John had blossomed while enrolled in the community college and had taken his course work very seriously. As a consequence, his grades were high enough to earn him a scholarship so that he could attend a prestigious school. His transfer was effortless, and when he visited the university he noticed a lot of different people milling around the campus, but he did not pay too much attention to any one person.

On the first day of class in engineering school, he faced an unexpected number of professors from foreign countries. He had a male professor from Pakistan, a male professor from Korea, a female professor from Germany, and a female African American professor from Chicago. None of the professors fit the mold of what he knew, they were as different from his Anglo-Saxon, Protestant upbringing as could be. John encountered a variety of issues, from understanding language barriers to facing cultural differences, that he did not understand or appreciate. In short, the transfer for John threw him into “culture shock.” At least John had an open mind and did not prejudge people. With that attitude, and an extra concerted effort to fully understand his professors, he was able to appreciate each of them for the diversity they brought to his education. As a successful engineer, John now affirms that having professors from many different countries and cultures was one of the best learning experiences of his college career. He was able to gain skills in dealing with differences and appreciating differences that serve him well in his professional life today.

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*“Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day.”*

ANONYMOUS

# MILESTONES

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

**T**his chapter is designed to make you more aware of diversity issues and to assist you in learning to appreciate differences among people. Diversity and diversity training are often confused with affirmative action. At the conclusion of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand what diversity is
- Learn how we can appreciate others and their differences
- Understand why diversity is important and should be embraced
- Have an informed discussion of discrimination (both intentional and unintentional)
- Understand what affirmative action is and what it is not
- Understand culture and how culture is defined
- Understand how to foster a diversity mind-set

Before you begin this chapter, take a few moments to complete the Milestones checklist. The statements are designed to determine what you already know about diversity and differences.

If you want to turn more of your answers into positive responses, then carefully consider what is included in this chapter and take part in the activities that are contained herein.

## WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

Answer each statement by checking “Y” for Yes, “N” for No, or “S” for Sometimes.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. I have friends who are of a different race.                                 | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 2. I have friends who are of different religions.                              | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 3. I understand that diversity is important in my friendships.                 | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 4. I understand that diversity is important in the workplace.                  | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 5. I have felt the effects of discrimination.                                  | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 6. I have been in a minority.  | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 7. I know the difference between intentional and unintentional discrimination. | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 8. I understand what culture is.   | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 9. I understand what tolerance is.   | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
| 10. I understand the value of open communication.                              | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |

## UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

**A**re you a fan of vegetable soup? On a chilly autumn day, a bowl of hot, steamy vegetable soup can do more than satisfy your hunger—it can give you a sense of comfort. We usually find comfort in things that we know well—an old pair of sneakers, a favorite shirt, or a pair of jeans. Soup, and some other foods as well, can evoke those same feelings of comfort. Have you ever considered how different all of the vegetables are that are key ingredients? Tomatoes are a far different consistency from corn or beans. In fact, if you look at those three vegetables, there is more that is different about them than is similar, yet when combined, with a pinch of salt and pepper, these vegetables take on an entirely different flavor and “taste.” Collectively, they are the basis for good, homemade, comforting vegetable soup.

*“Diversity is the acknowledgment of humanity within ourselves.”*

D. THORESON

## Primary and Secondary Dimensions of Diversity

Why all of this talk about soup and vegetables? Because in life, just as in “soup,” we all have individual characteristics that when combined make up a wonderful mix. These differences are characterized by diversity. Diversity comprises several *primary dimensions*—factors that can be seen and potentially can lead to discrimination. The primary dimensions of diversity are:

1. Age
2. Ethnicity
3. Gender
4. Physical ability
5. Race
6. Sexual orientation



You are likely to encounter individuals from all parts of the world in your college classes. Take the opportunity to learn from them and benefit from the diversity that surrounds you.

When we observe people with physical characteristics other than what we are familiar with, we have the potential to discriminate based on those characteristics. You are probably thinking to yourself that you would never discriminate against anyone based on any of the above listed characteristics. In fact, in our society, discrimination based on many of these characteristics is not only frowned upon socially, it is illegal. Sometimes, however, we use more subtle dimensions of diversity to discriminate against one another. These more subtle characteristics, or *secondary dimensions of diversity*, include:

1. Educational background
2. Geographic location
3. Income
4. Marital status
5. Military experience
6. Parental status
7. Religious beliefs
8. Work experience

These differences can cause us to act and react in a particular situation based on beliefs and assumptions we have about these characteristics. For example, some people may assume that someone from the South with a distinct southern accent is less intelligent, less well read, less traveled, or less cultured than others. That may or may not be the case. As with each of these dimensions, we cannot judge others until we know each person individually. When we begin to assign traits to certain categories of people, we begin to “stereotype” individuals. We often misjudge people and don’t give them a chance to let us know who they really are.

*Think of a time when you might not have had an open mind and misjudged someone whom you later learned to like and respect. What were your first impressions of that person?*

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*Were your impressions based on what you observed or based on what someone else told you about this person?*

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Often, we are not even aware of some of the biases that we have when we meet someone. We automatically begin thinking of reasons why we don't like the person and are not aware of the basis of our prejudices. Prejudice exists in modern society regardless of what one would like to believe. This has never been more apparent than with the use of "profiling." Many times, law enforcement determines what the "profile" of a particular criminal might be based on the characteristics of former criminals. This may be a helpful method for law enforcement to use, but it can cause true agony. Profiling is simply assuming that a certain set of characteristics exists in a particular situation based on past experience. Clearly, an entire culture cannot be judged by the actions of a few. To be truly educated is to know that there are many ways of viewing problems or situations. When you realize the various ways you can view the world, the world becomes a much more interesting place in which to live and work.

*"You are not educated as long as you have prejudices against anyone for any reason other than his or her character."*

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

## Exploring Diversity

### EXERCISE 13.1

Find at least one person in your class or school who is of a different religious faith than you. Spend some time talking about his or her faith and what the faith means.

*Do you feel comfortable?*

*Do you feel uncomfortable?*

*Why do you feel the way you do?*

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*Is this an easy exercise or one that you find difficult?*

*Why?*

## CULTURE

**A**ccording to the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary, culture is defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” It is further defined as “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a company or corporation.” Often, we define culture as involving people, places, and things. Culture plays an important role in any diversity situation. Culture allows us to be ourselves, based on our shared past and our beliefs, and to call on problem-solving techniques that have proven to work for us in the past. A person’s culture can help to predict how he or she may react to certain situations. Some Asian cultures, for example, stress honor and loyalty. Should an individual act in a way that is not within the cultural expectations, harmony is interrupted and confusion may occur. In the Japanese business culture, for example, if you are presenting your business card to another individual, you should do so using both hands to demonstrate that the “gift” has some level of importance. By the same token, if you are handed a business card, you should not immediately place the card in your suit pocket. You should spend a moment to acknowledge the card and then read the contents before putting it away. It is a sign of disrespect in both situations for you to dismiss the card—either as the giver or the receiver.

Working with and getting along with others is not always easy. This is especially true when we factor in the many cultural differences that exist in any group. Our families, the various roles we play in our families, and the hierarchies within our families all contribute to our belief system. In addition, our language, how we use language, and the communication breakdowns that are bound to occur can affect our ability to get along with one another. These factors, along with our religious differences and our ethnicity, all present challenges when trying to deal with one another.

The appreciation of various cultures enables us to see the world as a mosaic and challenges us to think of diversity as something that is to be valued. Harmonious cultural diversity goes beyond merely understanding someone else’s belief system and the way he or she has been raised—it allows us to celebrate and embrace the “differences” that are inevitable.

*“We are a nation of communities . . . a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky.”*

—GEORGE H. W. BUSH (WRITTEN BY PEGGY NOONAN)

## DISCRIMINATION

**W**ould you ever purposely exclude someone based on the color of his or her skin, hair, or eye color? Probably not. We have all been taught, through school and various other formalized situations, that discrimination has no place in our society. The United States has enacted legislation to prevent discrimination in certain situations, including the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and affirmation action. Yet, although we would not discriminate against anyone knowingly, we may be biased in the way we deal with people. When we think of an individual who is blind and mute, would we assume that individual is unable to learn? If that were the case, then the late Helen Keller would never have been given a chance to learn or to teach others. Often, our uninformed and misguided thoughts and prejudices cause us to incorrectly judge other people. If we exclude certain classes of people from our social and business settings, if we stereotype people based on an incorrect set of assumptions, or if we assume that certain groups of people, based on their language are “less than . . .,” then we are discriminating against others. Learning to be aware of our own biases and then learning to eliminate them from our actions leads to greater inclusion and acceptance. Think of a birthday party. We decide to have a party and invite a number of friends. People receive invitations and are considered “invitees.” Usually they do the proper thing and RSVP by the date indicated. Unfortunately, with every social situation, there are people who are not invited. In this scenario, there are the “invited” and the “un-invited.” Think on this—how often do we “un-invite” others with our actions and our words? No, this is not intended to be a discussion about who our friends are or how they get invited to parties, but rather an awareness that regardless of our situation, we are always “inviting” or “un-inviting” others based on our actions. Learning to embrace a more “inviting” philosophy should make us more aware of discriminatory acts and enable us to include more people into our circle of friends and acquaintances.

### Exploring Discrimination

### EXERCISE 13.2

Think of a time when you were not invited to a party or social event.

*How did it make you feel to know that others were invited and that you were not?*

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*Why do you think you were “eliminated” from the guest list? Were you discriminated against? If so, why?*

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*Can you think of situations in which you unintentionally discriminated against someone?*

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## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION



ften, when people talk about diversity, culture, and discrimination, the notion of affirmative action finds its way into the conversation. Just what *is* affirmative action? It is a deliberate process designed to remedy the effects of past discrimination, eliminate present discrimination, and prevent future discrimination. It is a mandated law (Executive Order 11246), and quite a number of public and private debates abound regarding affirmative action and how the law should be defined. California is the best-known state to deal with the affirmative action issue, specifically in regard to scholarships and admission to universities. An affirmative action plan will likely be in place in many places a student might eventually work. The plan should be specific about what is to be accomplished and should be designed to correct statistical differences caused by discrimination. Ultimately, affirmative action should be used as a “tool” to reach the goal of fair employment.

Myths and misconceptions about affirmative action include:

- It is another name for a quota system.
- African Americans are the only previously oppressed group that benefits from affirmative action.
- Affirmative action programs are not really needed, not in this day and time.
- Minorities are stealing jobs and opportunities from qualified majority applicants.



In reality, affirmative action plans are designed to:

- prohibit the use of quotas.
- prohibit employers from hiring unqualified people.
- involve proper training of employees and an awareness of fairness issues in the workplace.
- demonstrate a “good faith” effort on the part of the employer to ensure that barriers to employment, education, etc., are removed.

Another popular, and often-misunderstood, term in the world of work is “equal opportunity.” Equal opportunity is applicable to *all* citizens and not just groups that have been discriminated against historically. Likewise, it is not applicable only to minorities and to females and it is certainly not a social program. Equal opportunity means just what it says—an equal consideration for *all* for a particular job. Equal opportunity is essential for fair employment and is required by both federal and state law. On the other hand, equal opportunity is not a guarantee of a job. Both affirmative action and equal opportunity combine to make sure that in the world of work and education every citizen, regardless of race, creed, sexual orientation, etc., is given equal and fair treatment. In short, affirmative action and equal opportunity are good for the entire nation, and as such the preservation of these two programs has enjoyed national support.

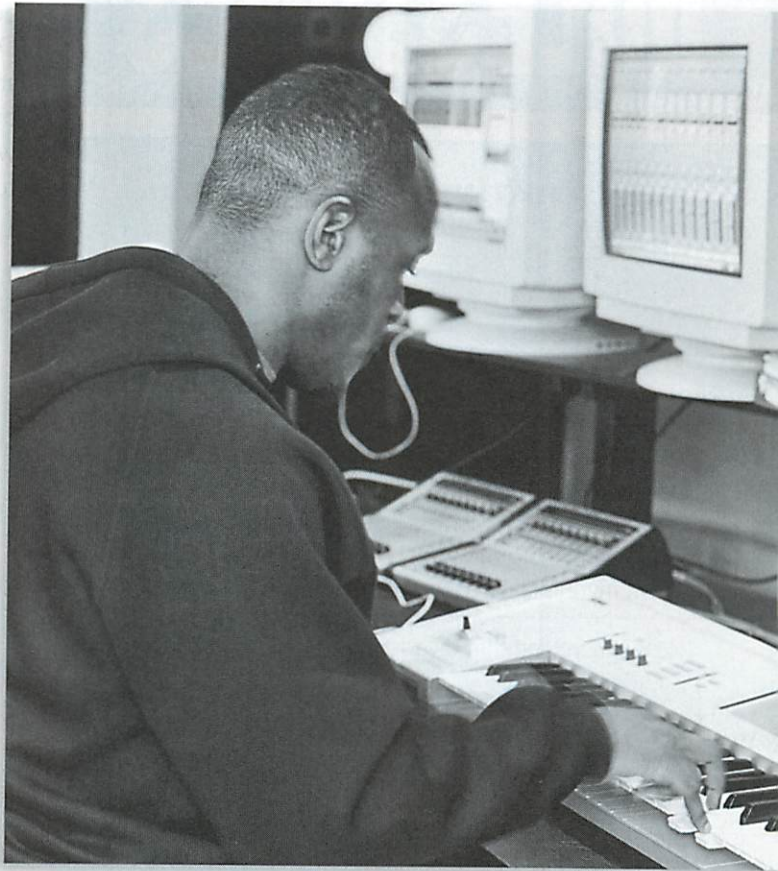
In conclusion, we all enjoy working and learning in an environment that respects us for who we are. We must all become more aware of one another and know that diversity exists among all groups of people. One of the most important life skills that a student can develop is to be tolerant of other individuals and their ideas. Having open and honest communication with our coworkers, fellow students, and friends is vital. The Golden Rule is still appropriate today: We should treat people just as we would like to be treated and learn to enjoy and appreciate the mosaic of life around us.

## THE NEXT STEP

**N**ow that you have completed this chapter, revisit the Milestones checklist.

How did you do on this inventory after reading this chapter?

If you would like to be more successful and learn from your environment, then it is vital that you understand cultural diversity and discrimination and



Affirmative action programs demonstrate a good faith effort on the part of employers to ensure that barriers to fair employment are removed.

# MILESTONES

## NOW THAT YOU ARE HERE . . .

Answer each statement by checking "Y" for Yes, "N" for No, or "S" for Sometimes.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
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| 2. I have friends who are of different religions.                              | <input type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N <input type="radio"/> S |
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be aware of your own actions toward others. Developing and maintaining an organizational structure that values diversity is the goal of many businesses, and as a graduate of this college you will be expected to possess the skills and abilities to work harmoniously with other people.



## Applying What You Know

Now that you have completed this chapter, answer the following questions:

1. Describe the differences between primary and secondary dimensions of diversity:

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2. How does the culture that you were raised in affect your actions and beliefs today?

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3. Explain the difference between discrimination and affirmative action.

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## Observations

### CHARTING YOUR COURSE



Why do we value diversity? Just as one of the opening paragraphs suggested: When we enjoy a tasty dish such as vegetable soup, we begin to realize the harmony of flavors and colors that come together to give us comfort. This analogy can be applied to the real world as we begin to appreciate, and celebrate, the differences that we possess. A valuable employee will be one who can work with a variety of people in harmony and free of conflict—in short, one who knows how to get along with others!

## Web Connections



[www.doi.gov/bureau-indian-affairs.html](http://www.doi.gov/bureau-indian-affairs.html)  
<http://info.lanic.utexas.edu/>  
[www.wku.edu/~yuanh/China/](http://www.wku.edu/~yuanh/China/)  
[www.freemaninstitute.com/AfAmSites.htm](http://www.freemaninstitute.com/AfAmSites.htm)  
[www.euroamerican.org/](http://www.euroamerican.org/)  
[www.personal.umich.edu/~kdown/multi.html](http://www.personal.umich.edu/~kdown/multi.html)



# Journal

As a result of this chapter, and in preparing for my journey, I plan to . . .