

THRIVING IN A DIVERSE WORLD



Higher education could bring you into the most diverse environment of your life. Your fellow students could come from many different ethnic groups, cultures, and countries. Consider the larger community involved with your school—faculty members, staff members, alumni, donors, and their families. This community can include anyone from an instructor’s newborn infant (age 0) to a retired instructor (age 80). Think of all the possible differences in their family backgrounds, education, job experience, religion, marital status, sexual orientation, and political viewpoints. Few institutions in our society can match the level of diversity found on some campuses.

To get the most from your education, use this environment to your advantage. Through your encounters with many types of people, gain new perspectives and new friends. Acquire skills for living in multicultural neighborhoods and working in a global economy.

You can cultivate friends from other cultures. Do this through volunteering, serving on committees, or any other activity in which people from other cultures are also involved. Then your understanding of other people unfolds in a natural, spontaneous way. Also experiment with the following strategies.

Switch cultural lenses. Diversity skills begin with learning about yourself and understanding the lenses through which you see the world. One way to do this is to intentionally switch lenses—that is, to consciously perceive familiar events in a new way.

For example, think of a situation in your life that involved an emotionally charged conflict among several people. Now mentally put yourself inside the skin of another person in that conflict. Ask yourself: “How would I view this situation if I were that person? Or if I were a person of

the opposite gender? Or if I were a member of a different racial or ethnic group? Or if I were older or younger?”

Do this consistently and you’ll discover that we live in a world of multiple realities. There are many different ways to interpret any event—and just as many ways to respond, given our individual differences.

Reflect on experiences of privilege and prejudice. Someone might tell you that he’s more likely to be promoted at work because he’s white and male—and that he’s been called “white trash” because he lives in a trailer park.

See if you can recall incidents such as these from your own life. Think of times when you were favored due to your gender, race, or age. Also think of times when you were excluded or ridiculed based on one of those same characteristics. In doing this, you’ll discover ways to identify with a wider range of people.

To complete this process, turn your self-discoveries into possibilities for new behaviors. For example, if you’re a younger student, you might usually join study groups with people who are about the same age as you. Make it your intention to invite an older learner to your group’s next meeting. When choosing whether to join a campus organization, take into account the diversity of its membership. And before you make a statement about anyone who differs significantly from you, ask yourself: “Is what I’m about to say accurate, or is it based on a belief that I’ve held for years but never examined?”

Look for common ground. Students in higher education often find that they worry about many of the same things—including tuition bills, the quality of dormitory food, and the shortage of on-campus parking spaces. More important, our fundamental goals as human beings—such as health, physical safety, and economic security—are desires that cross culture lines.

The key is to honor the differences among people while remembering what we have in common. Diversity is not just about our differences—it’s about our similarities. On a biological level, less than 1 percent of the human genome accounts for visible characteristics such as skin color. In terms of our genetic blueprint, we are more than 99 percent the same.¹

Look for individuals, not group representatives. Sometimes the way we speak glosses over differences among individuals and reinforces stereotypes. For example, a student worried about her grade in math expresses concern over “all those Asian students who are skewing the class curve.” Or a white music major assumes that her African American classmate knows a lot about jazz or hip hop music. We can avoid such errors by seeing people as individuals—not spokespersons for an entire group.

Be willing to accept feedback. Members of another culture might let you know that some of your words or actions had a meaning other than what you intended. Perhaps a comment that seems harmless to you is offensive to them. And they may tell you directly about it.

Avoid responding to such feedback with comments such as “Don’t get me wrong,” “You’re taking this way too seriously,” or “You’re too sensitive.”

Instead, listen without resistance. Open yourself to what others have to say. Remember to distinguish between the *intention* of your behavior from its actual *impact* on other people. Then take the feedback you receive and ask how you can use it to communicate more effectively in the future.

If you are new at responding to diversity, then expect to make some mistakes along the way. As long as you approach people in a spirit of tolerance, your words and actions can always be changed.

Speak up against discrimination. You might find yourself in the presence of someone who tells a racist joke, makes a homophobic comment, or utters an ethnic slur. When this happens, you have a right to state what you observe, share what you think, and communicate how you feel.

Depending on the circumstance, you might say:

- “That’s a stereotype and we don’t have to fall for it.”
- “Other people are going to take offense at that. Let’s tell jokes that don’t put people down.”
- “I realize that you don’t mean to offend anybody, but I feel hurt and angry by what you just said.”
- “As members of the majority culture around here, we can easily forget how comments like that affect other people.”
- “I know that an African American person told you that story, but I still think it’s racist and creates an atmosphere that I don’t want to be in.”

This kind of speaking may be the most difficult communicating you ever do. And if you *don’t* do it, you give the impression that you agree with biased speech.

In response to your candid comments, many people will apologize and express their willingness to change. Even if they don’t, you can still know that you practiced integrity by aligning your words with your values.

Speak and listen with cultural sensitivity. After first speaking to someone from another culture, don’t assume that you’ve been understood or that you fully understand the other person. The same action can have different meanings at different times, even for members of the same culture. Check it out. Verify what you think you have heard. Listen to see if what you spoke is what the other person received.

If you’re speaking to someone who doesn’t understand English well, keep the following ideas in mind:

- Speak slowly and distinctly.
- To clarify your statement, don’t repeat individual words over and over again. Restate your entire message in simple, direct language. Avoid slang.

- Use gestures to accompany your words.
- Since English courses for non-native speakers often emphasize written English, write down what you’re saying. Print your message in capitalized block letters.
- Stay calm and avoid sending nonverbal messages that you’re frustrated.

If you’re unsure about how well you’re communicating, ask questions: “I don’t know how to make this idea clear for you. How might I communicate better?” “When you look away from me during our conversation, I feel uneasy. Is there something else we need to talk about?” “When you don’t ask questions, I wonder if I am being clear. Do you want any more explanation?” Questions such as these can get culture differences out in the open in a constructive way.

Remember diversity when managing conflict. While in school or on the job, you might come into conflict with a person from another culture. Conflict is challenging enough to manage when it occurs between members of the same culture. When conflict gets enmeshed with cultural differences, the situation can become even more difficult.

Keep the following suggestions in mind when managing conflict:

- *Keep your temper in check.* People from other cultures might shrink from displays of sudden, negative emotion—for example, shouting or pointing.
- *Deliver your criticisms in private.* People in many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures place value on “saving face” in public.
- *Give the other person space.* Here the word *space* has two definitions. The first is physical space, meaning that standing close to people can be seen as a gesture of intimidation. The second is conversation space. Give people time to express their point of view. Allowing periods of silence might help.
- *Address people as equals.* For example, don’t offer the other person a chair so that she can sit while you stand and talk. Conduct your conversation at eye level rather than from a position of superiority. Also refer to people by their first names only if they use *your* first name.
- *Stick to the point.* When feeling angry or afraid, you might talk more than usual. A person from another culture—especially one who’s learning your language—might find it hard to take in everything you’re saying. Pause from time to time so that others can ask clarifying questions.
- *Focus on actions, not personalities.* People are less likely to feel personally attacked when you request specific changes in behavior. “Please show up for work right at 9 a.m.” is often more effective than “You’re irresponsible.”



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