

Valuing Diversity

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Introduction

According to the American Psychological Association, valuing diversity is what institutions and community members do to acknowledge the benefits resulting from differences and similarities. They work to build sustainable relationships among people and institutions with diverse memberships. A community that values diversity ensures that institutions provide equal treatment and access to resources and decisions to all community members regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical disability (American Psychological Association, 2002). On a personal level and community level, valuing diversity includes: Understanding cultural and ethnic differences in expression through verbal communication and body language and acceptance of those differences.

The United States is a nation of diversity. In fact, given the diversity of cultures found in the United States alone, it is more appropriate to emphasize multiculturalism than to speculate about a single United States' or American culture. Furthermore, the most recent census data very clearly point out that the American population is experiencing tremendous ethnic and minority growth.

In 1945, the American population was 86 percent white, 3 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Black, and 1 percent Asian. In 1995, the white population was 75 percent and the Hispanic population was 10 percent.

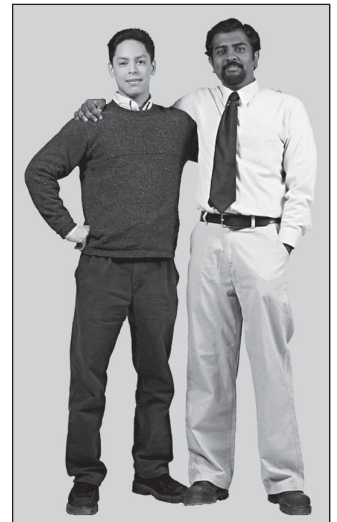
Census estimates for the United States' population in 2050 suggest the following representation:

- Whites – 53 percent
- Hispanics – 25 percent
- Blacks – 14 percent
- Asians – 8 percent
- American Indians – less than 1 percent

Immigration is a significant factor in the changing population. Since 1965, 20 million immigrants have come



to the United States. Approximately 1 million have come each year since 1990. The composition of the foreign-born population is changing dramatically as well. Between 1970 and 2000, for example, the share of foreign-born U.S. residents from Europe dropped from 62 percent to 15 percent. Over the same period, the share of the foreign-born from Asia grew from 9 percent to 25 percent, and the share from Latin America increased from 19 percent to 51 percent. In 2000, two-thirds of foreign-born Latin Americans were from Central America (including Mexico).



Supporters of multiculturalism are strong proponents of national executive proclamations recognizing our nation's various cultural heritage groups. Such proclamations serve an invaluable role in efforts to forge a life together that is based on mutual respect and interdependence. Each cultural group benefits. However, the greatest beneficiary is each community in our society.

Selected definitions of concepts used in discussing diversity

Comfort Zone – refers to feeling comfortable about different topics or activities. When we are inside our comfort zone, we are not challenged and we are not learning anything new.

Culture – refers to aspects of a social environment that are used to communicate values, such as what is considered good and desirable, right and wrong, normal, different, appropriate, or attractive.

Cultural oppression – uses social norms, rituals, language, music, and art to reflect and reinforce the belief that one social group is superior to another.

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Exploitation – is oppression that occurs through a steady process of transferring the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another. It involves a systematic process in which the energies of the “have-nots” are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the “haves.”

Feminism – is the valuing of women, and the belief in and advocacy for social, political, and economic equality and liberation for both women and men. Feminism questions and challenges patriarchal social values and structures that serve to enforce and maintain men’s dominance and women’s subordination.

Homophobia – is the fear, hatred, or intolerance of lesbians and gay men or any behavior that falls outside of traditional gender roles.

Learning edge – is when we are on the edge of our comfort zone, which may involve feelings of annoyance, anger, anxiety, surprise, confusion, or defensiveness. These actions are signs that our way of seeing things is being challenged.

Marginalization – refers to people as “marginals” when the system of labor cannot or will not employ them. (Examples: old people; young people; Blacks or Latins who cannot find first or second jobs; single mothers; people with mental or physical disabilities.)

Powerlessness – occurs when people do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions. The powerless must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. (Example: the working class)

Sexism – involves the individual, institutional, and societal/cultural beliefs and practices that favor men and subordinate women.

Socialization – begins before we are born, with no choice on our part, and continues throughout our lives as we receive systematic training from people we love on “how to be” our social identity.

Social oppression – exists when one social group, whether knowingly or unconsciously, exploits another social group for its own benefit.

White privilege – involves access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society received by whites, unconsciously or consciously, because of their skin color in a racist society.

For a more comprehensive list and definition of related concepts, see Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York: Routledge.

Relevant Quotation

“ . . . we all have been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals . . . ”

— Audre Lorde

An Action Plan to promote diversity and eliminate “isms” (racism, sexism, etc.).

- Identify the “ism” you want to eliminate or combat.
- Identify the resources or materials, if any, you would need to achieve your goal.
- Identify how you could get the resources.
- Identify the behaviors or steps that this action would entail.
- Identify a realistic time line for carrying out the steps involved in the plan.
- Identify the hazards or risks that you perceive to be involved.
- Be clear in answering the question, “Is this action worth taking that risk?”
- Identify possible obstacles you may encounter.
- Identify ways to overcome the obstacles.
- Identify supports or supporters you may have.
- Identify sources of additional support or supporters.
- Identify ways to measure or evaluate your success. (Address the question, “How can slow change be differentiated from failure?”)
- Begin implementing your plan.

Web Reading

Japanese Community Youth Council (www.jcyc.org)

National Center for Cultural Competence (www.georgetown.edu)

Surgeon General’s Report (www.mentalhealth.org)

Values for a Better Life (www.forbetterlife.org/values/quotes.asp)

officialkwanzaawebsite.org/

Valuing Diversity PowerPoint Presentation (www.wvu.edu/~exten/infores/pubs/ceospub.htm)