

Diversity: In Our International Interest

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As globalization accelerates, an understanding and commitment to diversity is necessary for the future of this country.

People have come to the United States from a myriad of cultures. They have come speaking hundreds of languages and many more dialects. In the process, something unique happened as millions of people from disparate parts of the world were molded into one nation. We have built a country that has accommodated continuing waves of immigrants from distant lands.

It is that constant influx of people from different countries that keeps the United States dynamic and diverse, with new local, regional, national and international perspectives. The story of the United States is unique among nations. And our schools--from kindergarten to graduate school--must teach students of all ages that diversity is important and integral to their education as international citizens. Students need to understand the role of diversity in the founding and shaping of this country, even when the circumstances included discrimination and conflict. How our students understand diversity in the United States will help them to embrace people from different backgrounds and appreciate their contributions to the continued development of the nation.

Andrew Young, a true Renaissance man--U.N. Ambassador, businessman, minister, educator, congressman, mayor and civil rights leader--has argued that the civil rights movement proved to be a historical marker for the foreign policy of this country. According to Young, the national commitment to end segregation, extending voting rights to women and people of color, the establishment of affirmative action policies and implementation of equal opportunity programs have served to uphold the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and given legitimacy to the messages that are carried abroad.

The racial progress of this country sends a message around the world about diversity--that people from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds will be treated

with respect and receive equal treatment in the United States. It is a powerful message for people from Ireland to the Sudan, where diversity can become the cause of conflict. At Magee College of the University of Ulster in Derry, Northern Ireland, scholars are working with community leaders to apply affirmative action principles to help integrate Protestants and Catholics. In Sudan, human rights activists, armed with the justness of their cause, are struggling to ensure that people in the south are accorded basic human rights. As Americans, we know first hand about the short- and long-term effects of discrimination and the violence that is perpetuated when people are viewed as less than human.

Without being accused of hypocrisy, Jimmy Carter, former U.S. President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was able to make human rights the cornerstone of his administration because the United States was addressing and making progress on race relations. It was the moral position of the United States on race relations that lent weight to the political and economic sanctions applied to South Africa and helped politicians, scholars, clergy, business and community leaders--of all races--to peacefully end the dehumanizing system of apartheid.

Our national commitment to diversity is the envy of the world. It is in our educational institutions that students learn of the past and current contributions of immigrants. We should stress to students that our diverse population continues to be the most valuable asset that drives this country economically, socially and culturally. We need to teach our students that diversity is indeed in our international interest.

The quality of educational institutions in the United States draws thousands of international students and scholars here each year. The more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States represent the best and most diverse educational system in the world. Unfortunately, the federal government is undermining this progress by imposing restrictive entry and visa requirements on international students in the name of national security. At the same time, federal, state and local governments continue to under-fund education with devastating consequences, especially in urban areas.

As the fastest growing ethnic group, Hispanics/Latinos will soon surpass the number of African Americans. And while Hispanics/Latinos may share a common language, they are as different culturally as the Irish immigrants were from the English during the 19th century, or as immigrants from Kenya are from those from Nigeria.

Helping students understand how diversity has helped the United States become a better nation will enable them to find solutions to problems in the future. As leaders in their increasingly diverse neighborhoods, they will be called upon to make decisions that will affect their entire community. While there may be disagreements about affirmative action or multiculturalism, there is little doubt that this country has benefited from its diverse population.

As a superpower, perhaps the greatest challenge facing this country is not the ability to deploy an overwhelming military force, but to be an example of how diverse cultures can live together peacefully. This can only be achieved if our educational institutions teach students about the interconnectedness of "diversity" and "international." Then, future generations will be able to speak to the benefits of diversity, letting the world know that diversity is indeed worth the effort.

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