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# America Struggles in the School of Diversity

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## America Struggles in the School of Diversity

**Black Student Union President Jean-Wilson Muscadin Jr. '03 writes on the need for a new model for cultural acceptance in America.**

Like most schoolchildren, I commonly heard the phrase 'melting pot' used by teachers and in textbooks to describe America's people. "We are a great nation because we have so many different types of people all coming together (as one)." As I have matured, I have come to realize this melting-pot ideal is a misrepresentation of America.

In high school chemistry, I learned about molecular structures. When an object is melted, its chemical composition is changed. Molecules that were once tightly packed together in solid form become loose and detached in liquid form. Applying this principle to the concept of a cultural melting pot implies that to become American one has to change his or her cultural makeup and release the values and ideals of one's heritage to adopt American ones. Our values become loose, detached, and liquid.

Is this how we want America to accept and embrace diversity? Turning Mexican food into Taco Bell is not accepting or embracing diversity. The melting-pot metaphor has been challenged by newer examples such as a stir-fry or a salad bowl. These are examples in which the contents are not changed, but the individual ingredients add to the taste and flavor. Putting stir-fry or a salad in a blender would be quite an unpleasant dining experience.

As America attempts to graduate to the next level in the school of diversity, we will have to stop trying to change our people and work harder to understand, accept, and embrace our people and the variety of cultures they represent. Too often we are closed-minded to things that differ from our long-established norms because what is familiar to us seems best.

How do we go about understanding our own people? America is the most culturally and ethnically diverse country in the world. Yet our education system, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, remains stubbornly Eurocentric. I remember, as a high school student, questioning why every subject seemed to begin in Europe and how little I knew about Asian, African, South American, and Native American cultures. I could tell you about every Anglo king and queen—from William the Conqueror to Elizabeth II—but I have no historical perspective on African kingdoms or Chinese dynasties.



Jean-Wilson Muscadin Jr. '03 is a business administration major and computer science minor at IWU. Among his many extracurricular activities, he is president of the Black Student Union and a Student Senate representative. After graduation, he plans to pursue an M.B.A. degree and a career in the financial services industry.

Our survival as a nation and as global citizens depends upon our ability to understand the perspectives of our fellow citizens—domestic and global. February, for example, is recognized as Black History Month, and should be an occasion when all Americans take time to learn about and celebrate the history and culture of our African-American citizens. Instead, most Americans scarcely pay attention to this history, and our mainstream media and schools hardly encourage them to do otherwise. Rationalizations of slavery, a paragraph on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a sentence on Malcolm X, and a footnote on Rosa Parks are not sufficient to aid the cause of knowledge. But with a better grasp of the true meaning of diversity, we can use Black History Month as an opportunity to replace such ignorance with understanding.

For those of us fortunate enough to attend a college or university, the journey from ignorance to understanding becomes more of a possibility. During this transition from childhood to adulthood, we learn to define ourselves in the context of our environment. We dig into a deeper level of understanding of disciplines as we question professionals and their perspectives. The fundamental virtue of a liberal arts institution like Illinois Wesleyan is its support of the idea that there is more than one right answer, and more than one perspective. As a university, we pride ourselves on the breadth of our knowledge, not the depth of one specific topic. Our classrooms, organizations, and residence halls contain people from many backgrounds. We as students may have different views, values, and perspectives but strive to create an inclusive atmosphere that fosters higher learning.

The rest of America could learn a lesson from this liberal arts model. Diversity is not just a political buzzword; it is a decision, an understanding, a lifestyle. Diversity, for example, means that liberals and conservatives can compromise and find common ground. Embracing diversity will be the challenge in America for decades to come, for it is the soul of America.

To meet this challenge, Americans will first have to learn to leave their cherished melting-pot ideal behind and learn to appreciate cultures the way they really are. Secondly, we have to understand that our differences only add to our depth as a nation. Lastly, we have to do more to recognize the world around us and do a better job of understanding issues with a global perspective. These will be the lessons Americans will have to grasp before we can finally graduate from the school of diversity.