

Coping with College Series

Diversity Among Us
Rob Flot, Staff Counselor

Often when we think of diversity we think of race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. However diversity extends far beyond these commonly used groupings. You actually have a multitude of cultural identities. For this article, let's define culture as the traditions, values, language, symbols, foods, etc that are passed from one generation (or from one group) to another. It's not hard to imagine a student at Illinois State being a member of five, six, seven....or even a dozen cultures!! For example, consider a black female traditional-aged student, in a sorority, who is a student-athlete, from an urban setting, with an upper middle class background. Using the simplistic definition of culture from above, how many cultural identities do you count? At least six or seven. This is important because we are surrounded by, and represent, a wealth of cultural differences on a daily basis. Some of it subtle, some not so subtle.

Many of the interpersonal problems people struggle with are actually cultures colliding. The more obvious "collisions" seem to center around issues like religious or racial differences. However, there are meaningful problems that occur related to cultural differences such as being an athlete or non-athlete, or being in a greek organization or not. These problems occur because of the differing beliefs and values that each group holds. Often people have a hard time seeing the world from the perspective of another. Those who can shift and consider differing perspectives often learn to accept, if not encourage, diverse opinions and viewpoints. Others can learn to view differences as "less than" or "bad", and find themselves putting down that which is different.

Diverse views and lifestyles can definitely cause conflict and turmoil. However, cultural diversity is the basis for much of the richness and beauty in the world. Imagine a world where everyone was of the same culture, same race, same religion, and same way of thinking. It would be like going to a car dealership and only having one make, model, and color to chose from. So perhaps it's a good thing that people have differing cultural values. Maybe these differences help to make the world an interesting and exciting place to live.....never REALLY knowing what fun you might find, or how you might grow, based upon what's around the next corner. That's not to say that different lifestyles may not come in conflict, but maybe they can coexist without one trying to destroy another.

How can this happen? It is really rather simple. It is important to realize that a person's culture, although maybe different from yours, is not better or worse.....merely different. The key is developing the confidence to accept, allow, and even encourage diverse ways of thinking and living.....not fearing that your

way of viewing the world will be threatened or lost because others see things differently.