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Faculty View: Does Equality Mean Treating Everyone The Same?

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Faculty view: Does equality mean treating everyone the same?

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the related black power, American Indian, women's, and gay and lesbian movements, challenged the assumption that assimilation at any cost should continue to be an American ideal. Moreover, each movement made explicit that in the United States, a person's race, sex, religion, ethnicity, financial standing, sexual orientation, and physical ability have always been crucial indicators of educational and occupational opportunities and of quality and length of life.

It was as a direct result of these movements that the branches of our federal government were encouraged to codify into law the country's best ideals of participatory democracy. As Columbia University historian Manning Marable observed when he spoke at Swarthmore in February, the pressure exerted from the margins of the society brought about tremendous change at the center.

Making race and sex discrimination illegal—and the explicit expression of bigotry unpopular—were wonderful beginnings of the long and difficult process of eradicating oppression in America. Yet many Americans treated the Civil Rights Act of 1965 as an apotheosis, erroneously assuming that formal equality instantly created informal equality as well. The goals of the movement, therefore, remained incomplete: Hatred, intolerance, stereotypical thinking, and discrimination—rather than being interrogated, exposed, and challenged—were recoded and moved underground, becoming implicit and convoluted.

Thus we find ourselves in a strange historical moment in which there are as many Americans who embrace multiculturalism as there are those uneasy about any celebration of difference that transcends an interest in food and music.

Opposition to multiculturalism and the policies that promote it runs the gamut from the blatantly self-serving to the idealistically principled.

In the case of the former, embracing this country's diverse present, and acknowledging a national history of systematic oppression and imperialism, exposes the hierarchies of the past and their continued influence on the present. Such exposure means that the privileges that accompany old hierarchies will be challenged and most likely upset.

In the case of the latter, opposition on principle to group-specific programs and consciousness evolves from the belief that attention to difference goes against the core beliefs of this society where justice is understood as equality, and equality is thought to mean same treatment.

This notion of social justice needs to be challenged and reinterpreted. It reflects an ethic of assimilation drawn selectively from ideas about equality that dominated the country from the Civil War through the McCarthy era. It wasn't just that everyone was supposed to be treated the same under the law, but everyone was supposed to aspire

to the same things, even if they could not possibly ever be the same. This ethic has been a basic social code in the United States, leading even the well intentioned to conclude that difference should not be acknowledged.

Most Americans have been weaned on the syllogistic package that difference implies hierarchy; hierarchy implies exploitation; and exploitation implies oppression; therefore, to avoid oppression, difference should not be recognized. The leap in logic occurs early when difference itself is understood as the locus of the problem rather than the various hierarchies of privilege and penalty that have shaped the nation.

America's colleges and universities in general—and Swarthmore College in particular—have never been exempt from participation in affirming the various hierarchies of privilege and penalty. Thus, as the free expression of bigotry and harassment rise on American campuses, it is imperative that we avoid retreating into the self-congratulatory delusion that colleges are intellectual safe havens unswayed by concerns of difference. College campuses are contexts, and, like all contexts, they are places where race, sex, and class relations get worked out over a range of issues from student and faculty composition to curriculum content.

The project of inclusion that Swarthmore has undertaken, despite its sometimes confused rhetoric of providing cultural groups for minority students without the acknowledgment of how much these groups and their constituents make the place intellectually stronger and socially healthier, is the challenging project of pursuing what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the double victory." The College's decision to be color and culture conscious is evidence of maturity, courage, and wisdom.

Part of the college experience is learning how to translate: faculty members translate knowledge and the passion for pursuing it; administrators translate leadership on campus and enthusiasm about the institution to the wider world; students translate their experiences and interpretations of what they learn to each other, their professors, and administrators. And members of the staff, often unsung, translate their skills and knowledge, making the College a hospitable place.

Swarthmore's goal must be to encourage in each of its participants the drive to become translators and offer them the tools to do so. For as we become better translators of experience, of culture, of ideas about justice and compassion, we step outside of our first and most comfortable "language." This is not just a skill of mastery but one of humility, for as translators we must acknowledge that even after listening carefully, we do not always get it right. It is exhausting work from which we each need occasional respite. But it is the most crucial work of democratic living.



ELEFTHERIOS KOSTANS

Sarah Susannah Willie is assistant professor of sociology and will become director of the Black Studies Program in the fall. Her book, When We Were Black: College, Race, and the Performance of Identity, is due out from Routledge Press next year.