

## The Classroom as Melting Pot

### Understanding the value of diversity on college campuses

Some see diversity as a melting pot. To others, it's like a tapestry woven from varied threads or a symphony that harmonizes all parts of the orchestra. Whatever the metaphor, one thing is clear: Today's college classrooms are more diverse than ever before, comprising students from different races, nationalities, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

But diversity is more than a coincidental by-product of our multicultural society. These days, this amazing American mix is considered a fundamental and essential component of the modern, effective college classroom experience.

"Diversity in experience and perspective is what has traditionally set America apart from the rest of the world," explains James Stephen Lee, undergraduate dean and interim associate provost at Cambridge College. "The diverse origins of our population support more creative and diverse perspectives in problem solving than can be found in largely homogenized societies. It's a real strength of our country, and it translates into a real benefit within the classroom, as well. The more eyes you have focused on a problem, the more solutions you will see."

In addition to improving their talents for creative problem solving, students who learn in a diverse environment develop heightened communication skills, expanded global awareness, and cultural and experiential sensitivity, Lee adds.

*"If you only have practice interacting with age peers, you will not be as skilled a communicator as those who have*

*studied alongside students across a diverse age and cultural range."*

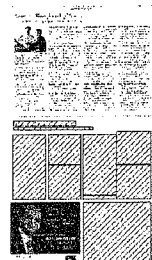
—James Stephen Lee, Cambridge College

At the University of Massachusetts Boston, most classes are small, which helps promote intimate discussions and an open exchange of ideas among students from different backgrounds. Rajini Srikanth, an English professor and director of the University Honors Program, says she typically teaches classes composed of students who represent not only different genders, ages, and cultures, but also a variety of academic majors. This added layer of interdisciplinary diversity enriches the learning, and teaching, experience even more.

"Students learn from their fellow classmates," Srikanth says. "Plus, I am a far better teacher because of the diversity in my classroom. Every day, I am very conscious of the many kinds of connections I am trying to help students make."

At times, Srikanth needs to bridge a wide gap. For example, one semester, she taught a class that included a retired pathologist and a teenager still in high school. Facilitating discussions across a diverse group like this can be challenging. But, ultimately, finding connections—the common denominators across race, age, religion, and language—is what will translate into career success in today's global economy, Srikanth says.

As Julie Wollman, vice president of academic affairs at Wheelock College, sees it, tomorrow's leaders need to both accept and draw strength from the diversity that surrounds us. "You can't change the world if you're denying the factors of diversity and



community," she explains.

Although Wheelock College is predominantly female, the student population there is diverse in a number of other ways, Wollman says. Nearly one-third of the Class of 2014 are students of color and more than half are first in their families to attend college. In addition, all students are required to complete a class focused on racial and cultural identities.

"Students today have to understand biases, differences, and they have to get past them," Wollman explains. "You can't be a successful professional in a multicultural world if you enter with biases."

Cambridge College has a long tradition

of serving a diverse student population, particularly when it comes to students returning to school after a hiatus, those who are older than the traditional college co-ed. Learning environments that blend different age groups put students at a distinct advantage when they enter the job market, Lee says.

"If you only have practice interacting with age peers, you will not be as skilled a communicator as those who have studied alongside students across a diverse age and cultural range," he concludes. "It's quite simple, really. Give students a diverse experience, and they will be comfortable and excel within diversity-rich environments." •

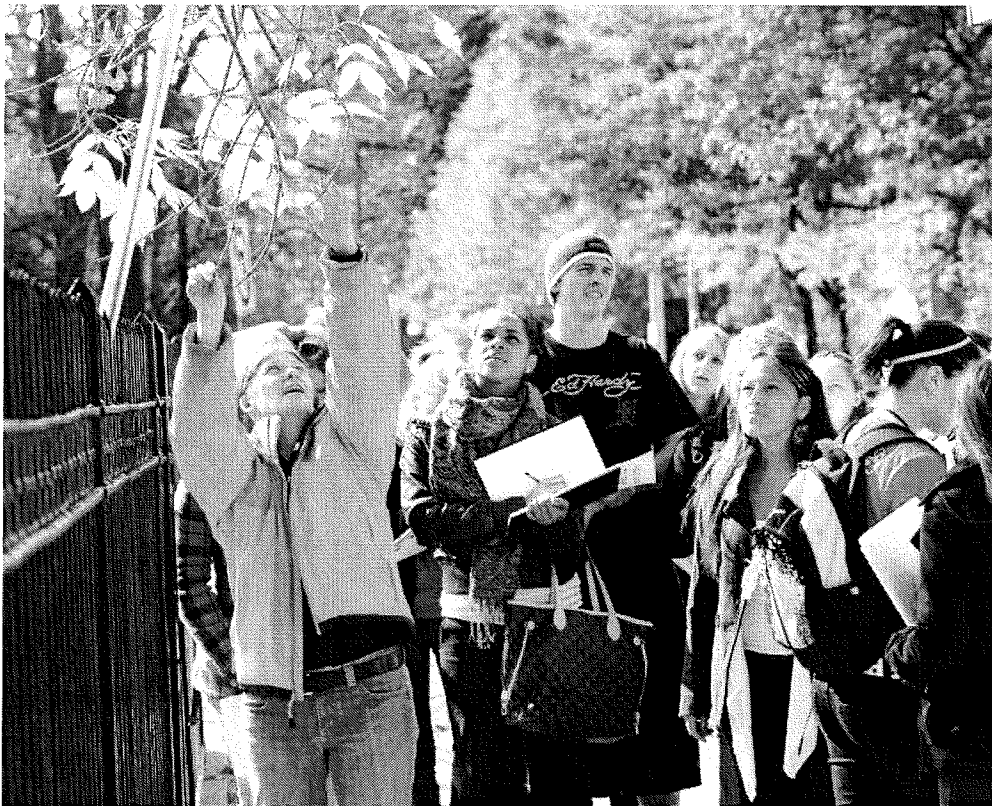


PHOTO: WHEELOCK COLLEGE

At Wheelock College, nearly one-third of the Class of 2014 are students of color and more than half are first in their families to attend college.