Gaining Cultural Competency

Written by: Neil Jamerson, Director of Student Conduct & Academic Integrity

One of the Twenty-First Century’s greatest philosophers, Miley Cyrus, wrote the lyrics "I hopped off the plane at LAX with a dream and my cardigan: welcome to the land of fame excess, am I gonna fit in?" I find her quandary particularly moving. Not only because Miley solved the age-old dilemma of how to rhyme “cardigan”, but because it also captures the crisis we all wrestle with in a new environment. ‘Do I belong here?’ Dr. Beverly Tatum, president of Spelman College, wrote a book about fitting in. I can’t properly represent all her thoughts, but I can share the big lesson for me.

Not fitting in can be both difficult and damaging in the long run. It’s hard to branch out into the big questions of who you are and what you stand for without first finding a group to fit in with. That group can give you the confidence to then ask those questions. Those groups tend to be formed around people w/similarities, whether the similarities are ability, race, gender, religious backgrounds, musical interests, etc. There’s no nefarious reason for it. It’s somewhat natural when trying to fit in. Understanding why people group the way they do is a step toward cultural competence.

Stop and think about groups where you appear similar. Are you carbon copies? Probably not. That’s another step towards cultural competence; simply understanding that people who appear alike from the outside actually have a diverse range of thoughts, feelings and interests. No one person can represent a group.

This month, I challenge you to see how many times you’re in groups that appear mostly similar or dissimilar. Compare how you feel in those moments? What’s it like to be in the majority? The minority?

Next time for cultural competence we’ll talk about the importance of extending ourselves beyond those groups that appear similar from the outside looking in.

Student Leader Reflection – Written by: Robert O’Brien; SLA, Beltones @ Belmont; Room in the Inn

This summer God gave me an incredible opportunity to spend 3 months living in the mountains of Northern Thailand. I must admit that I was nervous going into it. I had never been out of the country before. Questions kept coming to my head: "What if I can’t learn the language? What if I can’t eat the food? How am I supposed to connect to people living on the other side of the world?"

My cultural immersion was a baptism by fire. I spent less than a month living with another American and his host family before I moved to a neighboring village where I was not only the only native English speaker, but one of the ones that spoke any English at all. I had to learn fast just to survive. But, God was faithful to me in this. He used that experience to stretch me more than I could have thought possible.

The summer came and went faster than I could have imagined. Most of my days were spent working in the rice fields with my host father, and most of my evenings were spent with the village children teaching English and going to their youth worship nights.

After I truly got to know these wonderful people, I realized that they weren’t that different than me – they like to eat, they take naps in the middle of the day, they love their families, they like to watch sports – but I never would have known any of this if I hadn’t had this experience.

My challenge to you is to find a situation that’s different or uncomfortable and dive into it head first. Explore and embrace opportunities to gain cultural competency!