

Wall Street Journal declares 'Death of Diversity'

Riley Institute offers alternative path

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In the few weeks since renowned Harvard researcher Robert Putnam reported the results of his massive research effort on diverse communities, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century," there have been a slew of articles and editorials bemoaning the downfall of diversity and multiculturalism.

The Los Angeles Times: "How Diversity Divides Us." The Houston Chronicle: "So Diverse, Yet Averse to Reaching Out." The Orlando Sentinel: "Downfall of Diversity: Cliff Dwellers." The Atlanta Journal-Constitution: "Americans Conflicted about Diversity's Value." Even the millennial generation's Yahoo! News reported: "The Case against Multiculturalism."

And the list goes on. But perhaps the article which drew the most attention to Putnam's research was one written by deputy editorial page editor Daniel Henninger of the Wall Street Journal: "The Death of Diversity." For those who may have missed it, Henninger summed up the negatives as follows:

"Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference and to huddle unhappily in front of the television... 'hunkering down.'"

Cause for concern, to be sure. But Henninger and numerous other writers failed to give the same energy and attention to Putnam's declaration that, "In the long run, however, successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms

of social solidarity and more encompassing identities."

In fact, Putnam went to great pains to advocate the virtues of diversity, perhaps sensing the onslaught of negativism that would be attached to his research. Nevertheless, my purpose here is not to argue the pros and cons of Putnam's research or the many articles in response to it. Rather, I would like to call attention to the implications of said research, assuming that it is indeed valid. And considering his methodology and detailed data (30,000 interviews in 41 U.S. communities), it is at least worthy of serious consideration.

From my perspective, Putnam's research compels consideration of three important questions. One, if Putnam's conclusions are accurate, why is this the case? Second, do these conclusions matter? In other words, is there a problem with people in diverse communities "hunkering down" and staying to themselves? Thirdly, and perhaps most important, what are we going to do about it?

The answer to the first question will undoubtedly be the focus of some future research project, which may, in turn, generate more issues. Regarding the second question, we should all hope that if hunkering down means fewer people voting, volunteering and giving to charity, among other things, then yes, by all means it matters. So then, the third question is worth our immediate time and attention. What are going to do about it?

While there are no easy answers, it's worth noting that something can be done, and indeed in some quarters, things are being done.

Over the past four years, small groups of people have been gathering under the auspices of the Richard W. Riley Institute at Furman University to build community bridges and relationships across a multitude of diversity dimensions around which one could easily "hunker down." The Riley Institute's Diversity Leadership Academy has engaged more than 300 community leaders that are working across demographic lines to build communities throughout South Carolina that work for all the citizenry.

Mentoring programs, day camps, awards and

recognition ceremonies, Web sites – these are just a few examples of programs birthed in the Riley Institute's Academy that are pulling people off of their proverbial La-Z-Boys and getting them engaged in community building. The Riley Institute's program brings together leaders from all demographic backgrounds as well as all sectors of the community: business, education, religion, law enforcement, government, nonprofit, etc.

The cases are not simply focused on racial and gender sensitivity. In each session, the participants are arranged into small diverse groups of seven or eight and required to take on real-time community issues.

In this example, from one of the sessions, the group included the chief of police, the executive director of the YMCA, a county councilman, the CEO of a business magazine, a college vice president, a bank vice president, and the board vice president of a social justice organization. They decided to tackle the issue of pre-teen loitering on summer evenings for lack of anything constructive to do.

They developed a program which they called, "Camp Hope," a five-week "night camp" designed to provide positive, educational and fun experiences for at-risk youth between the ages of 7-12. By enrolling a collection of other concerned organizations, such as 100 Black Men, the local food bank, the city recreational department and others, the group was able to develop a program of educational, artistic, and health and fitness activities that kept the kids engaged while also enriching their knowledge and exercising their talents.

Admittedly, the Riley program is just a beginning. But as famed poet John Dryden said, "From small beginnings, mighty things grow." ☞

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