

# Guest column: Diverse cultures deserve celebrations - and understanding - year-round

**Luis G. Pedraja**

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As I thought about potential topics for this column, I struggled.

It should have been easy to choose a topic. February is Black History Month, so why not talk about the importance of Black history? But that was what was troubling me: Why should we limit celebrating and honoring Black history to just this month?

For that matter, why do we similarly limit only one month to celebrations commemorating Hispanic Heritage, Women's History, LGBTQ Pride, Asian and Pacific Islanders and so many others? Why don't we remember and celebrate them year-round? It troubles me that we do not celebrate the contributions of the many diverse cultures, gender, people, races and ethnicity on a regular basis.

The rich diversity of this country is our strength. Similarly, it pains me that we often ignore and gloss over the struggles, discrimination and historic oppression many of these groups and people endured and continue to endure. We must do more.

We live in a global age where we are exposed to the rich diversity of the human race, yet we fail to embrace it. Instead, many in our society see this richness as a threat to their own identities. They fail to learn from one another, to accept those who are different, to enrich their view of the world. They fall prey to nativism, identity politics, tribalism and xenophobia. They vilify those who are different simply because they are different. They mock and ridicule those who are not like them, reduce them to disparaging stereotypes and question their motives.

Often, those who are perceived as different become scapegoats, as the blame for the failings of our society or personal misfortunes are placed on them. This hatred all too often festers into extremist violence.

As culture wars continue to wage in our nation and our world, our rhetoric has become more divisive and hate speech has become normalized and tolerated. Rather than work together to build a more equitable, just and inclusive society, people have doubled down on their entrenched biases and disassociated themselves from those with a different perspective and point of view.

To some extent, social media allows all of us to gravitate solely to the voices of those who resonate with our own point of view, which legitimizes biases and discredits any who may dissent. Regardless of the validity, we take the plethora of claims in the media and the internet as fact, regardless of how ludicrous or outrageous they might be. In such an environment we are destined to become fragmented and insular, and in turn, poorer as a nation and as a society.

The 20th-century philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once wrote that history was like a searchlight, shining its light on a few and rendering everything else into obscurity.

As educators, our task is to expand the light of history and shine it not only on those who control the story but also on those whose story has been ignored or suppressed. In recent months, particularly in the public education sector, we have seen efforts to restrict the free pursuit of knowledge by some legislators and government leaders to prohibit the teaching of our actual history, when it challenges what we want to believe about our past. These important and vital teachings shed light on abuses and atrocities in our past, such as slavery, the Holocaust and the violent taking of Indigenous lands.

Rather than acknowledge a difficult truth and learn from it, some would rather accept a comfortable lie. The erasure of history poses an existential threat to

our future and to our democracy. If we don't learn from our mistakes, we will be doomed to repeat them.

Books and great literature open our eyes to different ideas and perspectives, and stretch our horizons. They are typically the product of research and undergo rigorous reviews by editorial boards, unlike social media that can be manipulated by anyone without any credentials.

Recently, we have seen a trend toward banning books that might raise difficult topics, challenge our norms or offend perceived sensibilities. Yet the pursuit of knowledge cannot limit our canon to simply that which is popular, generally accepted, dominant or palatable. If we did so, we would not have many of the advances in science — our world would be deemed flat, and the Earth would be the center of the universe.

Knowledge is refined through testing, questioning and withstanding the challenges of time. It is not our task to protect the truth, rather it is our job to seek it. Truth must stand on its own and be strong enough to withstand the test of time.

According to H.G. Wells, “civilization is in a race between education and catastrophe. Let us learn the truth and spread it as far and wide as our circumstances allow. For the truth is the greatest weapon we have.”

Education prepares us to seek the truth. It prepares us to meet the challenges and uncertainties of the future, engendering in us a thirst for knowledge and lifelong learning. It teaches us to be inquisitive, to not take things at face value, to engage in meaningful dialogue and be open to different perspectives.

In allowing different ideas, perspectives and voices to be heard and discussed, it not only helps us grow personally but also counters indoctrination and prepares an informed citizenry that is at the core of our democracy. Education also helps us to better understand who we are and appreciate the differences that make us unique.

Colleges and universities, like QCC, bring together people from different races, ethnicities, cultures, faiths, nationalities, genders, sexualities, ages and socioeconomic levels. This is particularly true for community colleges, which reflect the vast and diverse communities we serve.

Regardless of our differences, we work to forge relationships, shared experiences and understanding. In addition, we provide our students with the space to engage in respectful and meaningful dialogue that helps them understand and value their differences.

In addition, through guest speakers, presentations and events we celebrate and raise awareness of different cultures, ethnicities and people. Higher education teaches us not to fear differences but to appreciate and learn from one another, to find common ground and value each other.

In the classroom, we teach our students the skills to succeed in their careers but also the skills to be inquisitive, discerning, lifelong learners and engaged citizens. We value and respect each other, even when we disagree.

If we are to survive as a human race and avoid catastrophe, we need to accept our differences, learn from each other and find common ground. This is an age-old problem but one that I believe education can help as a catalyst for real change. Education provides a pathway for people to achieve their full potential and through it, we can all find a way toward a more inclusive, equitable and just society for everyone.