

College is all about strengthening an individual. Going into college, I saw most things as black and white, good or bad. I had my opinions and they were right. However, with the more people I meet and the more backgrounds I see...newsflash: not everyone sees the world like I do. This became incredibly apparent in my education classes (as I am studying to become a middle school teacher). My classmates and I would discuss hot topics in the education realm and share our thoughts in a way where everyone had the opportunity to speak. Unsurprisingly, there was never an issue where we all could agree upon one answer. My black and white philosophies began to blend and allow for some gray. In addition, I realize that everyone has a past that influences how they react in situations. Many times, a difficult past is carefully hidden. I have been learning that assumptions and instantaneous judgments often miss the mark entirely. Some of my close friends offer an aura of confidence and calm, or carefree goofiness, but deep down they are dealing with immense hurdles that a common passerby would never guess. Strength in community is not jumping to conclusions, but patiently loving others regardless of the baggage they may carry.

I've learned that people become empowered when they know that their voices are heard. Empathy is crucial to support others, but even more important, truly *knowing* them is the foundation to building strong relationships. As a teacher, my students will know that their opinions are valued. A "my way or the highway" attitude is not helpful and will tear down a relationship foundation rather than building it up. Instead, offering a safe place in my classroom for free expression of ideas will yield tremendous benefits. I may not understand exactly where someone is coming from, but I have learned to actively listen to others and empathize. Hasty judgment is destructive. College has shown me that you never truly know a person until you sit down and have a conversation with him or her. That is how lifelong friendships form and how trust is established.

College has been a major catalyst in reshaping my view of others. People helping people is all about setting aside differences and serving each other to the best of one's abilities. Supporting others, building relationships, understanding and empathizing with other people is the essence of community. My college experience has helped me understand this truth and has prepared me to support my students and my community, wherever that may be.