when they see street signs, billboards, election ballots, and automated teller machines
in Spanish. In 2006, President Bush decried the public singing of a Spanish version of
the “Star Spangled Banner” called “Nuestro Himno.” To forestall the possibility that
the United States might someday become a bilingual nation, over half of the states
have passed legislation declaring English as their official language.

Subcultures and Countercultures

Sociologists and anthropologists usually speak of culture as a characteristic of an
entire society. But culture can also exist in smaller, more narrowly defined units. A sub-
culture consists of the values, behaviors, and physical artifacts of a group that distinguish
it from the larger culture. Think of it as a culture within a culture. Certain racial and
ethnic groups, religions, age groups, even geographic areas can all constitute subcultures.

We don’t usually think of people with sensory deficits as constituting a subculture,
but many people who are deaf identify themselves as members of a subculture and take
pride in its unique values and norms. This issue received national attention in 2006
when the Board of Trustees at Gallaudet University, a liberal arts university for the deaf,
proposed hiring a new president. But students immediately protested because they felt
the candidate—who was deaf herself—wasn’t committed enough to deaf identity and
culture. They mocked her for not learning sign language until she was 23 and criticized
her for focusing too much attention on technologies to “fix” deafness, like cochlear
implants and more powerful hearing aids, and not enough on advocating for deaf rights
(Schemo, 2006b). The university eventually relented and abandoned their candidate.

To see a more common subculture, you need look no further than your own
school. You’re probably well aware of the material and nonmaterial subculture that is
unique to your campus. Perhaps some landmark—a bell tower or ornate archway—is
the defining symbol of the university, or maybe a piece of art occupies a hallowed place
in campus life. I’m sure you know your school mascot and the school colors. In addi-
tion, when you first arrived at school, you probably had to learn a tremendous amount
of new information about the nonmaterial subculture just to survive—how to register
for courses; how to address a professor; where to eat and study; what administrators,
faculty, and fellow students expect of you. At my university, the student newspaper
publishes a glossary of common words, phrases, acronyms, and nicknames at the
beginning of each academic year to aid first-year students in their adjustment to life on
campus. Just as you have to learn how to be a member of your society, you have to learn
how to be a member of your university subculture.

But placing a label on a subculture sometimes obscures its complexity and diver-
sity. For instance, you often hear people talk about the U.S. “teen subculture” as if it
were a single, self-contained entity that is the same everywhere in our society. But such
a characterization overlooks the multitude of subgroups within that subculture:

On any sustained wander through the world of American youth, one meets . . . an endless
array of ardent skaters, skins, rockers, ravers, rebels, heshers, punks, Goths, jocks, Rude
Boys, hippies, preps, rappers, neo-Nazis, cheerleaders, Satanists, and straight edged anar-
chists. This is just an arbitrary, incomplete catalogue of a few high-profile formations—the
kind that tend to have their own magazines, Web sites, fashion lines, and music playlists,
not to mention “beliefs.” There are thousands of smaller sects and splinters and tendencies,
gangs and subgangs and cliques, rising and falling all the time, each with a party line on a
range of cultural issues, large and small. (Finnegan, 1998, p. 349)