It takes more than diversity of campus populations for individuals to interact in meaningful ways with others of different backgrounds. Debra Miretzky and Sharon Stevens share their experience launching a series of campus conversations focused on raising personal awareness and building relationships across difference.

By Debra Miretzky and Sharon Stevens

Difficult Conversations

The 17th annual Dealing with Diversity Institute at Western Illinois University (WIU) was winding to a close after two days of speakers and panels. For the final session, we broke up into small groups for about 45 minutes, to talk more in depth, and then report out—and over an hour later, one of the organizers finally took the microphone to announce that it was time to wrap things up so the group using the room that evening could get in to get ready!

Inspired by the energy of those conversations, my colleague Janice Welsch and I (Debra) launched a project called "Difficult Conversations" (DifCon) almost one-and-a-half years later. Four discussions, focused on diversity-related topics, took place at WIU between September 2011 and March 2012. Anecdotally, there are significant concerns about campus relationships, primarily between white students and students of color, but also related to students of different religious backgrounds (e.g., Christian and Muslim). Despite the growing diversity in faculty and student bodies on our campus, students could still navigate through college without having to interact in meaningful ways with others of different backgrounds.

There are many priorities for colleges and universities to pursue at an institutional level. It may be more important for administrators to prioritize increased diversity in recruitment and retention of students (and faculty) than to take ownership of the challenge of making the experience of campus diversity positive and meaningful. Consequently, campus organizations or even individuals may need to undertake efforts aimed at increased intercultural understanding and interaction. We hope that sharing our process of designing and implementing an informal but deliberately focused venue for discussions around diversity encourages other institutions to consider their options for fostering "the art of conversation that is central to the moral art of democracy," as John Goodlad argued almost 20 years ago in *Democracy, Education and the Schools* (p. 105).

DifCon has some similarities to other initiatives, such as Campus Conversations on Race: A Talk Worth Having, housed at Wheelock College in Boston; the Difficult Dialogues Initiative, currently operating on 16 campuses in the United States; and the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network based in Washington, DC. These organizations train facilitators and target students for participation in courses or discussion groups that meet regularly for an agreed-upon period of time.

Such initiatives attempt to foster broad overall goals. Ximena Zúñiga, Biren A. Nagda, Mark Chesler, and Adena Cytron-Walker discuss three of them in "Intergroup Dialogue in Higher Education": consciousness raising, building relationships despite obstacles, and individual and collective initiatives for social justice. Consciousness raising means increasing awareness of one's own social identity groups. Joe might identify primarily as white and male, but also as middle

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class, gay, and Spanish-speaking. Some of these identities may carry a perceived "privilege"—some benefit acquired by virtue of belonging to a particular group. Others do not. Participants develop awareness of how multiple social identities intersect and influence perceptions and relationships.

Ideally, once participants achieve greater personal awareness, relationships that bridge differences and tensions are more likely to develop. Finally, a logical outgrowth of greater awareness and stronger connections would be a sense of empowerment, aimed at changing the culture of the campus and broader society.

DifCon shares those aims, if not the structure. It is unique in that this four-session pilot program was aimed at the entire campus community—faculty, staff, and students—and did not require any registration or preparation by participants or any special training for facilitators. Varied "openings" provided relevant contexts for each discussion, and we provided suggested discussion questions for small groups, but there was little else in the way of structure. This more laissez-faire model has benefits and drawbacks, as we will describe in the contexts of the challenges we faced and our achievements.

Higher Education as "The Last Best Hope"

Many people view colleges and universities as places that offer the last best hope for addressing divisions in our society. As the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) report by Caryn McTighe Musil, Mildred García, Cynthia A. Hudgins, Michael T. Nettles, William E. Sedlacek, and Daryl G. Smith, *To Form a More Perfect Union: Campus Diversity Initiatives*, notes, "If diversity is the norm and will continue to be so, higher education has a special role to play, the public believes, in ensuring that such differences become sources of strength, that is, a resource rather than a problem" (p. 9). In 2003, the US Supreme Court, in its University of Michigan *Gratz* and *Grutter* rulings, reaffirmed that diversity is a legitimate goal for higher education by finding race-conscious admissions policies constitutional when designed to consider race as *one* element of a flexible and individualized appraisal of applicants. An amicus brief filed by a group of Fortune 500 companies in support of Michigan's Law School admissions policy argued:

> For these students to realize their potential as leaders, it is essential that they be educated in an environment where they are exposed to diverse ideas, perspectives, and interactions […] Diversity in higher education is therefore a compelling government interest not only because of its positive effects on the educational environment itself, but also because of the crucial role diversity in higher education plays in preparing students to be the community leaders this country needs. (p. 2)

Higher education has responded to these challenges by making significant efforts in affirmative action, minority student and faculty recruitment, scholarships, targeted retention efforts, and the like. Additional public reinforcement has come from initiatives such as ethnic and women's studies courses, cultural awareness workshops, and designated cultural spaces and websites for underrepresented groups. However, as Priya Parker reminds us when she writes about her own involvement with the Sustained Dialogue program, these institutional stances do not necessarily soothe tension.

There is evidence suggesting that active engagement with diversity results in greater cognitive and

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social development, especially for those students who had limited contact with others of different backgrounds before entering college. Jeffrey Milem, for example, provides an overview of the individual, institutional, and societal benefits of diversity in higher education in a book called *Compelling Interest: Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Higher Education*. However, as another AACU report by Damon A. Williams, Joseph B. Berger, and Shederick A. McClendon, *Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions*, cautions:

> it is not simply the presence of ethnic and racial diversity on campus, but rather the *active engagement* with that diversity that is critically important for fostering student learning and development. (p. 25)

Among the varied opportunities for engagement, focused conversation seems to be increasingly recognized as especially powerful for bridging cultural gaps and improving student retention, satisfaction with college, and intellectual and social self-concept. The "contact hypothesis" theory was first developed by Gordon Allport as a means of addressing racial prejudice. He believed that, under certain conditions, cross-cultural contact is an effective way of reducing prejudice and increasing understanding. Casual, limited contact is not enough, though, and may actually reinforce stereotypes. Meaningful connections are more likely when individuals perceive each other as being of equal status, when encounters are based on common goals requiring cooperation, and when institutional authorities are perceived as supportive of this contact.

Building bridges across differences remains critically important in higher education and in American society. Generally, campus programs—whether called "sustained," "intergroup," or "difficult" dialogues—target students and often focus primarily on race. This is not surprising; Cornel West has described race as "the most explosive issue in American life" (p. 155). The Trayvon Martin case, in which a Florida neighborhood watch leader killed an unarmed black teenager, has once again exposed deep divisions among American citizens over race. Our public schools are literally becoming more segregated than they have been for decades, according to Gary Orfield of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. However, race is not the only flashpoint. The 2012 presidential primary season has revealed divisive gender and religious conflicts; immigration policy also remains a volatile issue. It seems opportunities for young people of differing backgrounds to grow up both observing and having ordinary, reasonable interactions are diminishing—certainly not good preparation for constructive diversity experiences on campus.

Creating Difficult Conversations: Fools Rush In

Each year I (Debra) attend WIU's annual Dealing with Diversity Institute (DWDI), and particularly look forward to the final small-group conversations about challenging issues like race, ethnicity, and class, especially because these allow me to meet students and faculty I otherwise would not. Both my collaborator Jan (who has co-directed DWDI since 1994) and I wondered why these smaller discussions could not happen more regularly on campus. We spent the 2010–11 academic year trying to gather support and received many good wishes and suggestions but few offers of concrete help.

Poet Alexander Pope's line "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" is apropos here. With virtually no knowledge of the literature on existing programs, but bolstered by the university's stated commitment to equity and diversity and our belief that we could count on a group of like-minded colleagues, we decided to move forward with four conversations during the upcoming academic year. We decided on a basic structure and focus for each session and a location that accommodated small groups. In order to connect with potential speakers, facilitators, and publicity oppor-

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tunities, we worked on enlisting sponsors and reaching out to campus organizations as the fall semester approached.

Three prominent organizations—the university's professional development center, the faculty union, and the University Diversity Council—agreed to serve as co-sponsors and disseminate information. Drawing upon Jan's extensive network of contacts developed over 35 years on campus, we considered potential facilitators—people from departments as varied as psychology and women's studies; business and law enforcement; and human resources and student services. Our criteria for selecting the eventual facilitators were their interest in the project, their commitment to cultural diversity initiatives, and their competence as professionals.

The Four Difficult Conversations: Overview

Two weeks prior to the September DifCon, the first of many all-campus e-mail notices went out announcing the four sessions:

> Prompted by discussions among various WIU constituencies and open to all faculty, staff, and students, Difficult Conversations will focus on issues specific to the WIU campus, its classrooms, residence halls, administrative offices, and other shared spaces. Though facilitators will share a certain amount of information, insight, and experience, participants are urged to take an active part in each conversation, bringing their own knowledge and experience to the discussions.

The four sessions were publicized as Recognizing and Responding to Prejudice—Mine and Yours (September 2011); University Policies and Intercultural Cooperation (November 2011); Challenging and Salvaging Situations in the Face of Biased Remarks (February 2012); and Take a Risk: It's Really Ok to Ask Me About ______________ (March 2012). Attendance ranged from approximately 80 in the first session to 35 at the last. September's turnout, largest for the series, was boosted by students fulfilling First-Year Experience (FYE) requirements.

We separated participants who came together after explaining that the conversations required interaction with people unfamiliar to them. Select faculty, staff, and students opened each session with engaging approaches ranging from "mini-lectures" about key concepts to personal reflections to skits. These deliberately brief openings set the stage by providing context for the small-group conversations. For the remaining time, groups could structure discussion around suggested questions left on each table, or branch out on their own. We deliberately did not ask tables to take notes, but discussion appeared to be lively. Many groups seemed to be referring to the provided questions. We also had voluntary evaluation forms at each table. Based on the comments about the session's topic and structure, as well as our own observations of the quality of engagement and interaction, we did "fine-tuning" in between sessions to hone the focus and structure of the remaining conversations.

In the first session, four speakers addressed the nature of prejudice and ignorance and the tendency to recognize these more in others than in oneself. A psychology professor opened with an overview of the nature of human prejudice. Staff members from residence life shared general thoughts about campus climate and experiences helping with the tensions of transitioning into a college setting. One shared her interaction with a white parent who withdrew her daughter from the university when told that her child's assigned roommate was African-American. Last, an African-American student advisor who is also a military chaplain shared his own struggles, having been the object of racism but also having experienced

strong negative feelings about some of the people he ministered to.

Examples of discussion questions at the tables included "How can we learn to recognize prejudice in ourselves and others when it manifests itself in very subtle ways?" and "What is our responsibility, as members of a culturally diverse community, when we witness discrimination that stems from prejudice?"

The second session addressed the topic of policy's influence on attitudes and behaviors regarding diversity. A faculty member in communications explained rationales for creating human resource policy and the limitations of such policy for governing individual interactions. Another professor in law enforcement, who had substantial experience monitoring faculty-administration disputes, and a student who was active in a number of campus organizations reflected on relations among faculty, staff, and students and how, in their experience, policy helped or hindered resolution of tensions. We asked participants to consider how tensions could be addressed without formal intervention becoming necessary. Questions provided to the tables included "How effective can policy be in legislating behavior or attitudes?" and "How can effective policies be strengthened and ineffective policies be replaced or revised?"

The new semester brought session three, which focused on responding to bias in everyday situations on campus, at home, and in public. Instead of speakers, a diverse group of seven students improvised skits that featured prejudiced behavior and remarks. In one, the actor playing a racist financial aid counselor assisted two female students who she assumes share her beliefs about undeserving black students receiving scholarships. Another skit featured family members who offer unsolicited advice when their home-for-the-holidays college student describes the new friends—including a lesbian student—she has made. Our actors also spoke up in the closing minutes to encourage participants' openness to new experiences and courage to stand up for those on the receiving end of prejudice.

At this session, the approximately 50 participants received a handout from the Teaching Tolerance website, "Six Steps to Speaking Up Against Everyday Bigotry." Questions at the tables included "Did you find yourself reacting differently to scenarios—was one more offensive than another; did one make you angrier than another? Did any leave you unmoved? Why might we react differently?" and "What kind of social norms keep us from addressing bias or prejudice when we encounter it? Where did you learn those norms?"

The last DifCon was structured to focus on "isms" like sexism and racism. After the success of the skits, we decided we wanted to try to continue, as much as possible, to make conversations less "scholarly" and more down to earth. We therefore revisited a concern I (Debra) had developed while teaching—that students from white, rural, Christian backgrounds were often genuinely uncomfortable about appearing "offensive" or racist, and as a result were afraid to engage with people different from them. Society teaches us to ignore outward differences, and this can make it easier to internalize standards of politeness that ironically perpetuate stereotypes and prevent meaningful engagement. We recruited three speakers who were willing to talk about experiencing prejudice or stereotyping because of a visible characteristic as well as share their thoughts about what they preferred to happen.

"Joan" is a professor and former law enforcement official, "Tracy" uses a wheelchair, and "Leila" is a Muslim student who wears a hijab. They shared with approximately 40 participants the frustration they felt interacting with others who made assumptions, whether out of ignorance or malice, based on visible characteristics. They took a few questions and then joined participants in their small groups. Discussion questions included "You heard from people who have experienced reactions based on dress/religion, gender, and disability. Are there other 'differences' that are more or less intimidating to you—skin color, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation?" and "Have you experienced a situation where you felt stereo-

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typed or judged because of how society labels difference? What was it like for you?"

Reflecting on the Conversations: Participant Comments

The evaluation forms provided at each conversation asked people to share what they had hoped to get by attending, what they had learned, and whether the structure and content of the DifCon was helpful. Overall, participants reported positive experiences.

Regarding what they hoped to get, we found that participants attended with the hopes of learning new information and communicating with others about the topics, of learning skills to deal with diversity and difference, and of challenging their own ideas and preconceptions. These were common themes from the evaluations across all four conversations.

Comments like "I hoped to gain a greater understanding of addressing differences" and "I wanted to have further insight into other people's experiences" are representative of those who came with expectations for a learning opportunity. Others described their desire to communicate about the topic with people outside their circle, sharing goals such as being able "to hear a different perspective on prejudice and racism. Also to be able to share my views with individuals with whom I may never had [sic] the opportunities" or to develop "more knowledge on what to say when you enter a conversation that can be difficult."

Overwhelmingly, participants in DifCons believed the structure of the sessions was effective. The small groups in particular were commended; as one person wrote, "I thought the small group was the best activity. It allowed me to hear people's stories that I would not normally have a chance to hear." The speakers and the skits were appreciated for providing useful context, and for easing the transition into discussion.

We also asked what participants had learned. The need to take action—to go beyond simple recognition of a problem—was a theme in comments across all four sessions. For many, potential action steps meant conscious attempts to see people as individuals, rather than "types," and called for some risk ("start talking, find a new person to talk to and learn about them—don't just judge"). In addition, many cited hearing from and talking with others about their opinions and experiences, in and of itself, as a valuable learning experience.

Reflecting on the Conversations: Our Observations

DifCon sought to go beyond putting different people in the same place at the same time by asking people to engage and *talk*—to share their experiences, perceptions, and concerns, and to engage in reasonable discussion and mutual learning. Sessions gave participants opportunities to think critically, in the hope they might consider work, peer, and other personal relationships and interactions in new ways—taking the program with them, so to speak. We are hopeful this will happen. One lasting memory will be the facilitators having to gently urge three young women, two African-American first-year students and one Muslim graduate student, out of the room because they were still talking once we had finished gathering our belongings after the last DifCon. It is highly unlikely this exchange would ever have happened had these students not decided to sit down at one of our tables.

Of course, a first year is not without obstacles and learning experiences. In planning the September session, we encountered the first of numerous challenges related to recruiting speakers who could offer relevant and stimulating context for our openings. As we searched for university representatives who could speak to the nature of problems on campus regarding racism and prejudice, we came up against what one colleague referred to as "the culture of loyalty and marketing." In other words, it was not easy to find an employee who would willingly recount stories of racism or other offensive behavior in residence halls or offices, possibly making the university look bad.

A second challenge emerged during planning for the second session. This session's focus had originally been

referred to by the planners as "university policies that can undercut intercultural cooperation" in communications. However, this description resulted in an e-mail from an administrator involved with the Diversity Council, who asked for "a list of the policies that apply to this topic." We quickly realized that the framing of the subject was potentially inflammatory, and changed the title to the broader, less accusatory "University Policies and Intercultural Cooperation." Despite this, the potential still existed for the session to devolve into "war stories." It became clear that it was necessary to clarify we were not interested in providing a forum for grievances, but rather looking to speakers to provide a helpful framework for considering the nexus between policy and behavioral choices—an insight useful for all future forums.

Organizing the final session was also a profound learning experience. While the intent and purpose of this conversation—to address concerns about seeming "offensive" but thereby avoiding interaction—was clear to us, we found this focus provoked strong responses for some invited speakers. For example, one professor of South Asian background, frequently complimented on her English skills by people who assume English is her second language, responded to the invitation with this:

> The truth is that I'm very tired of answering questions and educating people constantly. I disagree that there is a right way to ask a total stranger personal questions about where they are from and what do Muslims believe, etc. There is no right way to do that. If people want to learn, they should read a book. If they are already friends with someone, then they should feel free to ask questions. But there is nothing more debilitating than answering curious ignorant people's questions, satisfying their curiosity, and then being ignored because now they have nothing further to ask.

This perspective struck us as a possibility for a future conversation—whose responsibility is it to educate about difference?—and helped us gain clarity about goals for this last conversation. We wanted to challenge participants to recognize how easy it is to make assumptions about others based on what we see and to consider whether things could change without identifying this tendency and interrupting it.

While the challenges we experienced were bumps in the road, paradoxically, they also reinforced the lessons of DifCon for the organizers. We learned more about subtle perceptions of difference and how these shape beliefs and interactions. In planning for conversations among the broader campus community, we became aware of some quieter tensions that existed. There is certainly no shortage of topics for future conversations, for better or for worse.

Going Forward

We have achieved several things with the DifCon series. First, we launched a program that had not been attempted before on a university-wide level and succeeded in fostering student, faculty, and staff interaction, moving beyond the more passive "lecture-listener" event often typical on campuses. We have data on reactions to the conversations and their "day-of" effectiveness, including some indication that participants came to DifCons wanting to learn about the subject and left with an enhanced awareness of the need to be more introspective. Our plan for future years is to debrief facilitators after each forum. Recognition of the series has grown, resulting in a campus diversity award, strong coverage by the student newspaper, and a growing pool of people who are willing to assist.

We want to boost awareness and interest throughout the broader campus community, especially among those students who are more difficult to reach. We hope artful use of social media, not only to publicize conversations but also to connect with students between conversations, will help. We know students (and faculty) are frequently overbooked or overwhelmed, an obstacle for any campus event planner. We have secured a small grant for incentives for par-

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ticipation (movie tickets, refreshments). Formal connections with organizations such as the First-Year Experience program should help increase participation, although we believe it is important to maintain the DifCons as primarily voluntary opportunities.

Data on the longer-term effect of conversations on participants and the campus community will be helpful, particularly if we choose to seek funding from the university or outside sources to expand or enhance the program. Objectives like this raise the issue of the need to institutionalize this effort. On one hand, institutionalizing the DifCons by making them a project of an existing campus organization could have benefits, including stable funding and a public endorsement by administration. It could also reduce burnout. Zúñiga and her colleagues describe how sustainability can become an issue when volunteers are the backbone of projects (p. 84).

On the other hand, the measure of independence enjoyed by our small steering committee means that we are able to be responsive to the needs of our campus community and take risks in terms of the topics we believe are important to raise. We do not want to see DifCon experience "death by committee," or see our creativity stifled by bureaucracy.

For now, we are willing to recommit to another year of challenging discussions and see where this takes us. This open approach isn't so different from what we ask our students, faculty, and staff to do at every DifCon. We hope other institutions will consider what they can do from the bottom up as well.

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