

## RETHINKING DIVERSITY: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGES AND PERSONAL ENGAGEMENTS

The Comparative History of Ideas Program developed a new course, *(Re)Thinking Diversity*, that offers undergraduate students the opportunity to reflect on the complex and often contentious debates about meanings of diversity. Through guest lectures, readings, and discussions, course participants explore the idea of diversity in relation to various scholarly and theoretical perspectives on power, identity, and histories of oppression. Jeanette Bushnell, doctoral candidate in Women Studies, coordinated the project. To learn more about the course and hear podcasts from its winter 2006 offering, visit <http://depts.washington.edu/chid/CHID270/>.

### CONTEXT AND GOALS

Recognizing that the concept of “diversity” is prevalent in fields across the university, but often inadequately theorized, faculty and staff members in the Comparative History of Ideas (CHID) program convened an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty to develop and offer a new course. *(Re)Thinking Diversity* sought to introduce students to historical and contemporary discourses about diversity and to help them consider the implications of these discourses for their lives and for society at large.

### STRATEGY

A \$28,100 grant from the President’s Diversity Appraisal Implementation Fund supported a three-phase process of developing, piloting, and evaluating the course.

- During fall 2005, a group of twenty undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty met to select topics, readings, and pedagogical strategies for the course.
- In winter 2006, *(Re)Thinking Diversity* was offered to 125 undergraduate students. Twenty scholars of diversity from across the University gave guest lectures, five graduate students led quiz sections, and twelve peer facilitators led small group discussions. Graduate and undergraduate students engaged in evaluation of the course as it progressed.
- During spring quarter 2006, eighteen graduate and undergraduate students engaged in a post-class reflective seminar to evaluate the course and develop strategies for its expansion.

### OUTCOMES

The primary project outcome was the development of a new, permanent CHID course. In addition, graduate students and undergraduate peer facilitators institutionalized a collaborative approach to course planning and development. The course brought faculty from across campus together to share disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on diversity, as will each new offering of the course.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Course participants produced a range of ideas for consideration in offering *(Re)Thinking Diversity*, or similar courses, again. It is important to:

- Recognize and communicate that there is not a diversity “canon,” but rather there are a variety of approaches to teaching about diversity.
- Understand that incorporating all aspects of diversity in a quarter-long course is challenging. Course organizers must continue to develop strategies for teaching about multiple forms diversity and oppression, so that no one dimension of diversity is privileged over others.



*Project Briefs* highlight results of projects funded by the University of Washington’s President’s Diversity Appraisal Implementation Fund (2005–2006) to eliminate persistent barriers and challenges to achieving diversity. Projects addressed student development, faculty diversity, curriculum change and campus and workplace climate.

- Include multiple sources of theory and knowledge, such as music, video and spoken word, in addition to written texts. This inclusion demonstrates the diverse sources of knowledge.
- Prepare to facilitate difficult discussions. Teaching issues of power, identity, and oppression can challenge students and teachers to examine critically their own experiences and biases. While this can be positive, care must be taken to prevent or respond to interactions in the classroom that can cause harm to students.

## SUSTAINABILITY

*(Re)Thinking Diversity* is now a permanent and regular offering in CHID and can be used by majors to fulfill core major requirements. Subsequent offerings will involve a larger number of students.

## CONTACT LIST

Jeanette Bushnell, Course Coordinator, Department of Women Studies, [pembina@u.washington.edu](mailto:pembina@u.washington.edu)

Amy Peloff, Assistant Director, Comparative History of Ideas, [apeloff@u.washington.edu](mailto:apeloff@u.washington.edu)

Cynthia Anderson, Advisor, Comparative History of Ideas, [chid@u.washington.edu](mailto:chid@u.washington.edu)

## 2006 COURSE SYLLABUS (excerpts)

### Course Objectives

1. All participants in this course will strive to increase their knowledge about “diversity” and learn from each other.
2. We will study several historical trajectories of oppressions, how oppressions are tied to diversity, and how we are personally involved with these in our everyday lives.
3. We will study the fluid nature of identities and how forces influence individual’s lived realities.
4. We will learn to recognize these processes and become more conscious of our choices as we take on identities and attempt to place identities on others.
5. We will critically engage in conversations about the nature of difference and societies’ engagements with difference.
6. We will learn how multiple university disciplines and other knowledge systems engage in conversations about difference.

7. We will explore ways in which the Westernized academy has or has not engaged with diversity, with diversity’s implied concepts of difference and hierarchy, or with power and privilege endowed or withheld within complex systems of creating and identifying difference.

### Course Schedule

*Week 1*—Stories and Theories

Guest Lecturer: David Allen, Women Studies

*Week 2*—Knowledges

Guest Lecturer: Dian Million, American Indian Studies

*Week 3*—Philosophy and Media

Guest Lecturers: Bill Talbott, Philosophy, and David Silver, Communication

*Week 4*—Imperialism and Colonialism

Guest Lecturers: Kiko Benitez, Comparative Literature, and Luana Ross, Women Studies and Native Voices

*Week 5*—Immigration and Assimilation

Guest Lecturers: Anu Taranath, English, and Rick Bonus, American Ethnic Studies

*Week 6*—Identities

Guest Lecturers: Scott Winn, Social Work, and Steve Woodard, Education and Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity

*Week 7*—Social Justice and Political Realities

Guest Lecturers: Robin DiAngelo, Social Work and Education, and Naomi Murakawa, Political Science

*Week 8*—Religion and Law

Guest Lecturers: Martin Jaffee, Comparative Religion, and Louis Wolcher, Law

*Week 9*—Western Science

Guest Lecturers: Crispin Thurlow, Communication, and Phillip Thurtle, CHID

*Week 10*—Education

Guest Lecturer: Geneva Gay, Education

Administrative Panel : Jim Antony, Education

(Moderator), Rusty Barceló, former UW Vice President, Phyllis Wise, UW Provost, Ana Mari Cauce, Vice Provost

To view the full syllabus, see <http://depts.washington.edu/chid/CHID270/>. The lectures for the spring 2007 offering of the course are publicly available at <http://www.css.washington.edu/podcast> under special events.

Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity  
 Box 355845  
 University of Washington  
 Seattle, WA 98195-5845  
 206-685-0518  
[vpoma@u.washington.edu](mailto:vpoma@u.washington.edu)