

FACULTY PROFILE

2006 Brotman Award

IDEA Center Wins Prestigious Brotman Award for Instructional Excellence



Biren Nagda

On June 8, Associate Professor Biren “Ratnesh” Nagda accepted the prestigious University of Washington Brotman Award for Instructional Excellence on behalf of the Intergroup Dialogue, Education and Action (IDEA) Center. The mission of the Center is to support campus and community efforts geared toward effectively engaging across

differences in working towards greater social justice. The Award’s inscription reads:

This Award recognizes a Center that transforms the lives of its students as well as the communities they serve. By teaching and inspiring them to reach across racial, economic, and cultural divides, the Center has fostered a corps of skilled, engaged social workers who are committed and prepared to address issues of oppression and empowerment, and promote social justice for all.

“[IDEA] has been on the cutting edge for so long,” says Nagda. “This Award affirms that the difficult, but hopeful and humanizing work that we do is both important and imperative in today’s diverse yet stratified world.”

Nagda founded the IDEA Center in 1996 and spearheaded the curriculum development, drawing on his teaching and research experiences at the University of Michigan, where he helped develop the intergroup dialogue model. Intergroup dialogues, a key offering of the Center, bring together students from diverse social backgrounds in facilitated discussions about diversity, inequality and social change. Students participate in personally-involving, intellectually-challenging and emotionally-engaging dialogues about sensitive social issues that are otherwise often divisive.

“I remember how anxious I was in the dialogue and how uneasy it first made me feel,” recalls former IDEA student, Christine Parker. “It is very difficult to talk about issues of racism, inequality, and prejudice with others.... The IDEA classes created an environment where it was okay to tell our truths and to respect others, to take our dialogues a step deeper, and to name what was present in the room.”

For students like Parker, the experience of shared learning often develops into strong social relationships and inspiration to act on their learning. Many students continue their involvement with IDEA by taking more advanced courses and facilitating intergroup dialogues of their own, sharing the work begun in their lives with other students. This program of sustained and conceptually integrated courses enables students to integrate their passion and commitments into real skills for dialogue, critical self-reflection and collaboration across differences.

“Students leave the program transformed—energized and vitalized—in their commitments to addressing social inequalities, keeping engaged as life-long learners, and continually applying their learning from IDEA in their chosen academic and career paths,” says Dean Edwina Uehara.

IDEA has also expanded its programs beyond the School of Social Work. Most recently, IDEA is partnering with the Desmond Tutu Peace Center in Cape Town, South Africa, which has adapted intergroup dialogue pedagogy for its peace-building programs. Nationally, IDEA is leading a multi-university research consortium assessing the impact of intergroup dialogues on student learning. On campus, in collaboration with the UW Office of Undergraduate Education, IDEA now offers intergroup dialogues for undergraduates in the larger University.

Along with the Award’s distinction, the IDEA Center will receive \$35,000 in unrestricted funds to further the scope of its work at the University.

“More than a culmination of our work,” says Nagda, “the Brotman Award is a springboard for even more substantive efforts toward greater social justice. It is wonderful to bear witness to how we, as the School of Social Work, are making such a strong contribution to the educational and social impact mission of the larger University.” ❄

For more information about the Intergroup Dialogue, Education and Action (IDEA) Center, please visit www.ssw.washington.edu/idea.