
Today's News

Wednesday, July 16, 2008

'Intergroup Dialogue' Promoted as Using Racial Tension to Teach

By [PETER SCHMIDT](#)

Colleges struggle to get students of different races and genders to learn from one another. Now several major colleges are promoting a teaching method that deliberately stirs up conflict in the classroom to expose students to different perspectives.

The institutions, including several flagship universities, plan to train 30 other colleges in the approach, known as "intergroup dialogue," this month at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. They also have undertaken a long-term study of the educational benefits of intergroup-dialogue programs, partly in hopes that their findings will inspire other colleges to establish similar ones.

The leader of the effort is Patricia Y. Gurin, a professor emerita of psychology and women's studies at Michigan. She was the university's key expert witness on the educational benefits of diversity programs when its race-conscious admissions policies were challenged in the federal courts from 1997 into 2003. Although the Supreme Court upheld the use of race-conscious admissions in a 2003 ruling involving Michigan's law school, Ms. Gurin says she walked away from that legal battle convinced that colleges needed to use the racial and ethnic diversity on their campuses to demonstrably improve learning.

"If diversity is really going to mean anything, it is not just having students in the same place. They have to interact," Ms. Gurin says. "They need to learn to have deep and meaningful conversations about topics that people want to avoid."

Already there are signs of an emerging backlash against intergroup-dialogue programs from academe's conservatives and advocates of traditional teaching methods. The National Association of Scholars, for example, issued a report last spring alleging that intergroup dialogue is part of a broader movement to indoctrinate students in leftist ideology. A [statement](#) released by the association on Tuesday says that the movement "aims at winning converts to an orthodoxy" and offers "thought reform, not education."

Webs and Bowls

A defining feature of intergroup dialogue is that it brings together students from subsets of the population that either have clashed or had little contact with each other. The thought is that such groups can learn from conflict in a structured setting in which their talks unfold over time and all participants are on equal footing.

A typical intergroup-dialogue program involves 12 to 18 students from two or more "identity groups" and has four stages. Initially those involved in a program agree to ground rules and are led through activities to get to know each other. Then they explore their differences and what they have in common, and, in the third stage, take on topics that have divided them in the past. In the fourth and final stage, students are asked to build alliances with each other and to develop plans to bring about social change.

One common activity is the "web of oppression" exercise, in which students hold and discuss a web of string draped with labels that bear racist or sexist jokes or other statements intended to spark discussions of power and discrimination. Other exercises include "fishbowls," in which one identity group discusses an issue while the remaining students stand around it and listen, and "gallery walk," in which students are asked to respond to pictures, quotations, and data displayed around them in a room.

Allison M. Gorsuch, who is pursuing a doctorate in history at Yale University, received training as an intergroup-dialogue facilitator at the University of Michigan and led a class there two years ago, as a senior. She says many students signed up because the classes offered two credits and were regarded as "pretty much a guaranteed A."

"They were basically graded on whether they showed up or not, or whether they turned in their journals every week," she says.

Ms. Gorsuch says such a grading policy did not bother her because she did not want students thinking their grades might suffer if they spoke their minds. "As the semester went on, students would feel more comfortable with each other and start challenging each other," she says. "I think people made progress."

Human Experiment

The nine-college collaborative devoted to the spread of such programs is known as the Multi-University Intergroup Dialogue Research Project. Joining Michigan in it are Arizona State University, Occidental College, Syracuse University, the University of California at San Diego, the main campuses of the University of Maryland, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Texas, and the University of Washington. The William T. Grant Foundation and the Ford Foundation help finance the group's work.

The collaborative's leaders say their group has studied the approach and offered training in it to make sure colleges use it correctly. They say intergroup dialogue can teach students valuable lessons and critical-thinking skills, but, if handled improperly, it also has the potential to worsen relations among students.

"Talking about these topics can blow up if you don't do it right," Ms. Gurin says.

The group bills its study as the first experimental look at diversity's educational benefits. Each of the nine colleges is setting up classes of 12 to 16 students—if possible, with equal numbers of white men, white women, nonwhite men, and nonwhite women. The students' responses to a survey will be compared over time with those of others on waiting lists to participate. To help distinguish between the effects of intergroup dialogue and those of other academic offerings, both groups are being compared with students in the same regular social-science classes dealing with race and gender.

Researchers involved in the study say complications have kept them from proceeding exactly as they had hoped. For example, some applicants to the intergroup-dialogue programs refused to place themselves in

certain racial or ethnic categories—a problem dealt with by automatically excluding them from the classes being studied. In addition, not enough minority students applied to the classes to allow the researchers to study the effects of intergroup dialogue on specific racial and ethnic minority groups.

Despite such setbacks, the researchers say the study is bearing fruit. Preliminary findings presented in May at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education suggest that students in the program are more aware of their own racial or ethnic identity and more inclined to try to bridge differences with others.

Among the results researchers hope to see are students expressing a desire to work with others to promote social justice and being more likely to attribute problems such as poverty to societal inequities rather than to individual failings.

Ms. Gurin says she recognizes that some conservatives might perceive liberal ideology behind such goals. She says, however, that intergroup dialogue does not appear to change where students identify themselves on the ideological spectrum. "I am not trying to change conservatives to liberals," she says. "I am trying to challenge students to think in ways that are difficult for them to think."

Peter W. Wood, executive director of the National Association of Scholars, is not convinced. He says intergroup dialogue is an "overtly political" means of trying to indoctrinate students to see oppression all around them and push for social change.

"I regard it as extremely reductive," he says, "to treat all group behavior as concerned with conflict or power." In the statement it issued this week, his organization characterized intergroup dialogue as part of a national movement in academe that seeks to coerce students to "confess their racial, sexual, and other prejudices; admit that American society is, by its nature, oppressive; and pledge to promote specific forms of social and political change."

Seeds From Ann Arbor

The University of Michigan developed intergroup dialogue at Ann Arbor 20 years ago, mainly in response to racial tensions that roiled the campus at the time. It appears that no one is tracking how many colleges use the approach, but experts on campus-diversity programs say it has become much more widespread in the past decade. Workshops on it have become common at national education conferences, and Michigan has held summer programs to train other colleges in it since 2006.

Gloria J. Bouis, associate director of the office of human-relations programs at the University of Maryland at College Park, says her institution began offering intergroup dialogue eight years ago, after a survey found that many students did not think race relations on the campus were helped much by posters, fliers, speeches, and forums promoting diversity. "They wanted a more sustained program, either through the curriculum or through a workshop or seminar," she says.

Ms. Bouis says Maryland's program, "Words of Engagement," leaves students more self-aware and better able to learn from others. And she welcomes the collaborative's efforts to measure the programs because "it is always important to have some data."

Michigan remains one of the leading practitioners of intergroup dialogue. It trains undergraduates as intergroup-dialogue facilitators and each semester conducts about 20 dialogue classes on topics like sexual

orientation, relations between black and Jewish people, and white racial identity. Most of the programs in the nine-college project were established by people who had been at Michigan in some capacity.

'Managed' Conflict

Jesús G. Treviño oversaw one of the nation's largest intergroup-dialogue programs in his former job as director of the intergroup-relations center at Arizona State University, and he has set up a program at the University of Denver in his current position as that institution's associate provost for multicultural excellence. He says students generally will not enroll in intergroup-dialogue programs without being offered some incentive, such as academic credits, and many are initially nervous about participating because "they think this is going to be like the Jerry Springer show."

By the end of the program, Mr. Treviño says, students "end up making friends with people they would not normally have made friends with," and many go on to share the insights gained from the experience in discussions in other classes. The key to an effective intergroup-dialogue program, he says, is having well-trained discussion facilitators who know how to maintain a safe environment when there is some tension among participants, but not so much that the discussion shuts down or students verbally or physically attack each other. "There has to be a certain amount of tension in order for this to work," he says.

Ms. Gurin says the obstacle to the growth of intergroup-dialogue programs on campuses is not a lack of interested minority students, but a lack of funds to hire qualified facilitators to lead the programs. "It is limited by money," she says.

Emma P. Simson, who graduated from the University of Maryland last year, says she took two intergroup-dialogue classes there and found them so rewarding that she worked with other students to urge university administrators to make the classes mandatory for all freshmen. The idea went nowhere, in part because of the lack of potential facilitators on the campus.

Intergroup dialogue, she says, "provided a really good opportunity that I might not have found elsewhere in the university" and "is something I think should happen on every college campus."

[Copyright](#) © 2008 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#)