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Feature Stories

When Diversity Training Goes Awry

By Jamal Watson
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When Diversity Training Goes Awry

Done incorrectly, what should be a useful exercise can and has backfired on some colleges and universities.

By Jamal Watson

Initially, Courtney Halligan, a first-year student at the University of Delaware, was not opposed to attending a diversity training session that was required of all incoming freshmen. In fact, the 18-year-old New Jersey native assumed that the experience would be an opportunity for her to learn more about students from different backgrounds.

It didn't take long for Halligan to change her mind.



Dr. Marie Amey-Taylor, director of learning and development for Temple University's human resources department, conducts a creative problem-solving session with faculty. She recommends that institutions conduct a climate assessment on campus before doing any diversity training.

pressure from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based civil liberties advocacy group that monitors freedom of speech issues on campuses across the country, the university decided last semester to suspend the controversial program.

"Our concern was not the substance of the program but the way that it was administered," says Samantha Harris, director of legal and public advocacy for FIRE. "It crossed the line from education to indoctrination."

In a message to the community that was posted on the school's Web site last November, University of Delaware President Patrick T. Harker explained his rationale for suspending the program. "There are questions about [the program's] practices that must be addressed, and there are reasons for concern that the actual purpose is not being fulfilled," Harker wrote.

Dr. Michael Gilbert, the school's vice president for student life, says that a campus committee has been formed to strategize on ways to revamp the program for next year and that diversity education remains a priority at the state university.

"The university had good intentions in initiating a program to teach students to be tolerant of those who are different from them, but the way the program was run was unacceptable," says Halligan.

The debacle at UD is the latest embarrassing incident in which diversity training has backfired, possibly causing more harm than good and alienating students in the process. Diversity experts point to these examples as cause for college officials across the nation to re-examine and reform their own campus diversity training programs.

The major problem, experts agree, is that there is no uniformity in training, and some individuals who call themselves diversity trainers have received little or no instruction at all in facilitating discussions on sensitive issues such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Additionally, no independent agency exists that has the authority to certify or sanction trainers, leaving the task to colleges and universities to weed through résumés to figure out if those applying to conduct the trainings

In one-on-one and group sessions conducted in the dormitories by resident assistants, Halligan and dozens of other White students complained that they were made to feel like racists. She adds that they were blamed for the legacy of racism that Blacks and other minority groups have endured through the years.

Meanwhile, other students expressed anger that they were encouraged to talk openly about their sexuality, and some gay students said that they even felt pressured to publicly out themselves.

"I was personally offended," says Halligan, who is majoring in communications. "I was angered when a document was used in the training that stated that 'all people of European descent are racist.' When I attempted to express my opinion against such statements, I was silenced."

In response to complaints by students like Halligan, and

pressure from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based civil liberties advocacy group

that monitors freedom of speech issues on campuses across the country, the university decided last semester to suspend the

controversial program.

are indeed qualified.

"This leads to great variance across the board in terms of the type of training that is done and the philosophy behind the training," says Dr. Marie Amey-Taylor, director of learning and development in the human resources department at Temple University.

Some trainers facilitate around diversity issues with the goal of raising social justice issues, while others may use diversity training to focus on behavior modification or ensuring that a college or university is in compliance with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulations.

Amey-Taylor, who has been a diversity trainer for more than 30 years, mainly conducts workshops and training for faculty and staff at Temple and at other colleges and universities across the country. In her work, she uses a variety of exercises and processing models to help participants confront their own biases and prejudicial behavior.

"If not done correctly, these sessions are not only dangerous, but can be destructive," says Amey-Taylor, who believes that diversity training sessions involving hot-button issues should be facilitated by someone who has years of experience and cannot be left to student resident assistants who may have received their training in an hours-long session.

"This is not customer service work," says Amey-Taylor, whose dissertation, "Diversity Trainers: Personal Profiles, Paradigms and Practices," addresses the issue of preparedness within the field. "My feeling is that this is one of those topical areas that require a high level of skill. You can't expect a person to be good on their feet. They have to be very skillful."

But in an effort to save money, more colleges and universities have resorted to hiring outside diversity trainers to conduct the initial training of residential life staff, but have then used their own student leaders to carry out the trainings on the general student population. Many diversity practitioners argue that these types of training-to-training programs have proven unsuccessful.

And even when some colleges contract to bring in a professional trainer, the tactics used by the individual have sometimes caused great concern on campus. For example, in 2006, Wilkes University, located in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., fired the school's multicultural affairs coordinator after a diversity consultant hired to conduct a training session called one student of Indian descent a terrorist. Other students were allegedly made to hurl derogatory slurs at each other in an effort to take away the negative sting of the words.

"I am embarrassed when people in our field get on their soapbox and further polarize students with this blame and shame game," says Mauricio Velásquez, who is president of The Diversity Training Group, a Northern Virginia-based organization that conducts trainings for colleges, universities and corporations. "To blame White students for the wrongs of their forefathers doesn't work. We're in the business of unifying, not dividing."

Velásquez and Amey-Taylor recommend that colleges and universities who are looking to hire outside diversity consultants scrutinize the résumés and references of candidates and create a checklist that asks questions such as: "What is your philosophy on diversity education?" and "How do you define diversity?" They also suggest individuals explain the types of exercises and activities that they use when they facilitate sessions.

Experts also argue that some colleges mistakenly believe that they can train students to confront racial prejudice, homophobia, ageism, sexism and other biases in a two- or three-day session that lasts for just a few hours.

"Diversity training needs to be ongoing. You can't do it one time," says Jane Elliott, a diversity trainer who is sometimes referred to as the "foremother" of diversity training, in part because of the "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes" exercise that she conducted on a group of third-grade students in the 1960s. This now-famous exercise labeled participants as inferior or superior based solely upon the color of their eyes and exposed them to the experience of being a minority.

"What happens is that so many colleges do diversity training once a year and they figure that it's taken care of and that they've done their job," says Elliott. "But we don't teach American literature for one hour and expect students to know it for the rest of their lives. It has to be an ongoing process."

Amey-Taylor agrees. "We didn't learn all of our isms overnight, and we cannot unlearn or modify all of our isms within three hours."

Elliott and others argue that colleges should implement a year-long class where students regularly challenge their own biases in a safe environment that is facilitated by expert trainers and reinforced with readings and lectures.

While some form of diversity training has become common on most college campuses over the last decade, it is often implemented in response to a polarizing incident on campus, like the discovery of a noose, a swastika or anti-gay epithets scribbled across a bathroom stall.

Last year, several colleges mandated diversity training after a series of incidents involving themed parties at which White



Mauricio Velásquez, President,
The Diversity Training Group

students dressed up in blackface and partygoers perpetuated racial stereotypes by carrying 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor and wearing Afro wigs, necklaces with large medallions and name tags bearing traditionally Black and Hispanic names.

"Too often the training that is done is a knee-jerk reaction to something that has happened and is reactive rather than proactive," says Amey-Taylor, adding that every college and university should conduct an assessment that examines the climate on campus before any diversity training session is conducted. Amey-Taylor says that college officials should create a set of goals for the session to benefit all students.

They should also keep in mind that diversity training should fulfill the school's larger goal of recognizing and respecting diversity at all levels, including the enhancement of minority faculty and staff on campus. She says that top-level managers should be rewarded or held accountable for their commitment to such practices.

"There has to be a commitment by the organization that includes diversity competency in its performance management systems," says Amey-Taylor.

Amey-Taylor who is part of an improvisational theater group made up of a half-dozen diversity trainers, has found the use of theater to be an effective vehicle to allow "actors to do and say those things that people can't do." Her troupe has performed across the world.

"If we define diversity in its broadest context, it allows conversations to include similarities and differences and allows everyone to feel comfortable and uncomfortable in that dialogue," says Amey-Taylor. "If you start with the premise that diversity education is essential to being a whole human being, everyone can benefit."

Diversity Training Tips From the Experts

- Before any diversity training sessions begin, college officials should first conduct an assessment that examines the campus climate.
 - College officials should create a set of goals to determine the purpose for the sessions and the benefits for students/staff.
 - When interviewing diversity consultants, college officials should ask, "What is your philosophy on diversity education?" and "How do you define diversity?"
 - Ask diversity consultants to explain the types of exercises and activities that they use when they facilitate sessions.
 - Consider implementing a year-long class for students to regularly challenge their own biases in a safe environment that is facilitated by expert trainers.
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*Resources

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DIVERSITY WEB STAFF

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The Diversity Web Staff is a group of higher education professionals devoted to connecting, amplifying and advancing campus diversity work throughout postsecondary education. The Diversity Web project is housed within the Office of Diversity, Equity and Global Initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The Office of Diversity, Equity and Global Initiatives (DEGI) sees diversity and global knowledge as essential elements of any effort to foster civic engagement among today's college students. To support those goals, the office helps colleges and universities to establish diversity as a comprehensive institutional commitment and educational priority.

*Disclaimer: This is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

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