

Pluralism Projects in Action: A Report on the Difficult Dialogues Initiative

By Leslie M. Schwartz

The Ford Foundation's involvement in the Difficult Dialogues initiative is a recent example of how to support programs relating to pluralism within the academy. An overview of the Difficult Dialogues initiative and a summary of various programs that were implemented at institutions across the country are presented with the hope that other colleges and universities will move toward similar action to support pluralism in the academy.

An ongoing mission of higher education is to create environments that support scholarly inquiry, creative thought, groundbreaking research, and inter-disciplinary programming. Cultivating open dialogue that is inclusive of varying viewpoints is essential to upholding this mission and promoting a pluralistic atmosphere on college campuses. In 2005, The Ford Foundation launched *Difficult Dialogues: Promoting Pluralism and Academic Freedom on Campus* to support the creation of curricular and co-curricular programs that enrich learning, encourage new scholarship, and engage students and faculty in constructive dialogue about contentious political, religious, racial and cultural issues.

Currently, 43 institutions across the country are implementing projects that address these issues through the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative. The Ford Foundation has awarded 27 colleges and universities with \$100,000 grants to support these campus efforts. Over the course of the two year initiative, the grantees are invited to share their experiences and ideas at regional conferences coordinated by the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression in Charlottesville, Virginia. Additionally, the Center awarded \$10,000 stipends to 16 other institutions to engage them in the initiative. It also hosts a web-based forum for project directors to share ideas online.

Our higher education community currently faces the ever increasing need for curricular and co-curricular programs that address issues related to understanding the rich religious diversity within our campuses, and how to create and support environments that foster this sense of pluralism. "Colleges and universities are on the front line in weaving together this unprecedented diversity of faiths, races/ethnicities, and cultures into a new American social fabric," stated Ford Foundation President Susan V. Berresford in a letter to college and university presidents in 2005 at the start of the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative. She

continued by sharing that “diversity is simply a fact of our local and global world, but pluralism requires engaging that diversity with study, debate, and dialogue; and this constitutes a new intellectual challenge for colleges and universities.”

In an effort to raise awareness and promote pluralistic campus environments, many institutions involved in the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative designed programs to address concerns that echo Berresford’s sentiments. The following project summaries from six participating colleges and universities from across the country demonstrate constructive methods for raising awareness about pluralism and increasing inter-faith dialogue.

Arizona State University – *Teaching and Talking about Religion in Public*

Arizona State University’s Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict, in collaboration with the Intergroup Relations Center and the Department of Religious Studies, led an innovative faculty development and curriculum enrichment project to educate and prepare students for a world marked by increasing diversity and religious conflict. The project focused on improving teaching about religion and religious conflict in contemporary social contexts, both within the department of religious studies and in other units of the University. Specifically, this program initiated an interdisciplinary faculty seminar to support professors whose teaching engages sensitive religious issues, developed faculty skills to facilitate conversation about religion, and enlarged the focus in the classroom on cultural and religious pluralism. To this end, the project team is creating an undergraduate certificate program in religion and conflict that will also provide intellectual and pedagogical models for public engagement of religious ideas and conflicts. In sum, this project seeks to become a national model that will enhance academic freedom and religious pluralism by promoting classroom dialogue on contentious religious issues.

Barnard College – *Religion, Freedom and the Politics of Identity*

Barnard’s program aimed to create a campus environment where students and faculty can engage deeply in intellectual explorations of political and religious issues through the following program components: A faculty seminar that addressed topics at the intersection of religion and academic freedom and explore pedagogical approaches to controversial issues; advanced seminars for seniors exploring the intersection of religion and the academy and the politics of religious identity; and new and revised courses for Barnard’s general education curricula. Barnard hopes that this program will support the creation of new curricular material and pedagogy at key transition points for students, first as freshmen and later as seniors.

San José State University – *To Increase the University’s Capacity to Support Open Discussion of Controversial Issues*

San José State University’s eighteen-month project aimed to prepare a core of individual students, faculty and professional staff who can take on leadership roles in facilitating difficult dialogues in the curriculum in a developmentally appropriate way, supported by related co-curricular opportunities. Key project activities included student and faculty

dialogue-facilitation programs, campus dialogues on issues related to religious and cultural diversity in the local context, and development of a curriculum toolkit for the First-Year Experience program (seminars and co-curricular support for entering first-year and transfer students). Through this project, the SJSU planning team has learned “that genuine dialogue is risky, and that people need a climate of safety and trust to speak their mind and to really hear others who have different views and opinions.”

University of California, Irvine – *Imagining the Future: Dissent, Dialogue and the Freedom to Inquire*

Building on continuing attempts to protect academic freedom, this project used techniques drawn from peace-building and respect initiatives already under way to foster productive dialogue on campus. UCI Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, Manuel Gomez, shared that “with the importation of conflicts raging in other parts of the world onto our campuses, the stakes seem especially high, because not only are we working to preserve the university as a safe and dynamic multicultural community, but we seem to be fighting to preserve the most basic freedoms of inquiry and debate without which we cannot sustain even the most elementary dimensions of diversity.” In order to meet these challenges, the UCI designed three new courses to educate students about contemporary issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, traditions of religious conflict and religious tolerance, and peace building. In addition to these courses, the university developed a series of teaching seminars to increase the ability of faculty and graduate teaching assistants to facilitate dialogue in existing courses that deal with sensitive topics. Workshops offered participation in the conflict resolution process, and experts promoted dialogue both on and off campus. The project also included a year-long series of lectures and other public events designed to heighten awareness of religious and ethnic conflict, peace-building techniques, and successful collaborations that have grown out of situations once dominated by conflict.

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor – *Religious Diversity in the Public Research University*

Led by the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, this project started a campus-wide effort to create an environment that embraces and models respect for diversity and religious pluralism. This initiative has engaged faculty, students, and community members in discussion, exchange, and study, so that religious difference is seen as an opportunity for reflection and exchange, rather than silence, animosity, or fear. In order to introduce a variety of perspectives and encourage cross-campus dialogue, several units have collaborated and participated in this year-long project, including the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, the Edward Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning, the Life Sciences and Society Program, the Michigan Community Scholars Program, The Program on Intergroup Relations, and Residence Education. Activities include a faculty fellows program for course development, faculty seminars on religion and spirituality, student dialogue groups on religion, community forums on ethical issues in human genetics, and roundtables on student faith as a motivator for community service.

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee – *Service-Learning and the Infusion of Cultural and Religious Diversity in the Undergraduate Core Curriculum*

This project involved a number of activities on and off-campus to spur more candid dialogues about cultural pluralism and diversity. To expand the number of faculty trained in conducting dialogues and in using service learning, it created two summer workshops on how to teach about ethnic, racial, and religious pluralism. Included was a student panel discussing the impact of religious differences when it comes to in-class discussion of controversial topics. The summer workshops served as a vehicle for faculty to engage in dialogues about their own differences, to share materials, assignments, and learning goals, and to plan units on pluralism across the curriculum. The project also supported a conference co-sponsored by Milwaukee's Interfaith Conference, a *Difficult Dialogues* Brown-Bag series, and specific curriculum-development projects focused on pluralism. Two key themes run throughout these activities: Critical self-reflection on one's own cultural identity is a required foundation for true cross-cultural dialogue, and practical experiences in multicultural settings are vital instruments in advancing an appreciation of pluralism.

Toward Future Institutional Change

These six project summaries highlight current work revolving around creating more aware and inclusive campus communities in colleges and universities nationwide. The diversity reflected in the above programs shows various methods that have been implemented to educate students, staff, and faculty on issues related to pluralism in the academy. In the words of President Susan

Berresford, "the selected projects illustrate the thoughtful and creative ways institutions are promoting intellectually rigorous scholarship and open debate that is essential to higher education. Colleges and universities are uniquely suited to expand knowledge, understanding and discussion of controversial issues that affect us all."

The example set by the Ford Foundation and the Thomas Jefferson Center through the creation and promotion of the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative demonstrates the importance of supporting ongoing efforts relating to pluralism in higher education. *Difficult Dialogues* is part of a broader, \$12 million effort by the Ford Foundation to understand and combat anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of bigotry in the United States and Europe. It builds on the foundation's history of supporting efforts by colleges and universities to foster more inclusive campus environments and to engage effectively with the growing racial, religious and ethnic diversity of their student bodies.

For additional information on the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative or other related projects, visit the program webpage at <http://difficultdialogues.org/>

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