Breaking Silence: Difficult Dialogues at the University of Nebraska at Omaha
Final Report to the Ford Foundation
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Dr. Deborah Smith-Howell  
Associate Vice-Chancellor, Academic Affairs  
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Dear Deb:

Attached is a copy of our final report to the Ford Foundation. Since the Difficult Dialogues grant was actually made to the chancellor, John Christensen may want to see it, and Terry Hynes might find it valuable as she acquaints herself with faculty & staff efforts to promote diversity and free speech. When you’ve had a chance to look over the report, please send it on to John, Terry, and others as appropriate.

Thank you for your support at every stage of our work on Difficult Dialogues.

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Rhetoric is not the enemy of truth. Silence is.

- Sharon Crowley

At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the Difficult Dialogues Initiative began with the observation that, when confronted with highly charged topics – particularly race, religion, and sexual orientation – people on our campus often hesitated to speak their minds, retreating into polite commonplaces or complete silence. To encourage members of the campus community to address conflicting values and beliefs in a spirit of open, active inquiry, we undertook to train faculty and staff in dialogue as a communicative practice and to create opportunities for dialogue about human difference.

In planning the project, we took seriously the goal of changing the campus climate. We set out to achieve a broad and sustainable impact. The project began with a workshop for a core group of thirty-three faculty, staff, and administrators and, over the course of twenty-eight months, it reached many more UNO employees, hundreds of students, and members of the Omaha community. Because we focused both on issues and on communication skills, participants have gained a deeper appreciation of diversity and have been equipped with strategies for addressing conflict over a wide range of issues, now and in the future.

In the paragraphs that follow, we describe the project’s objectives, the activities by which they were achieved, and specific measurable outcomes. The first section, “Use of Funds,” is supplemented by a Financial Report. These cover only the period since our last report, from January 1, 2008 to June 30, 2008. In the remaining sections, we describe and reflect on the entire grant period from March 1, 2006 to June 30, 2008.

Use of Funds

Proposed Use of Funds
Our proposal projected expenditures during the project’s final six months arising from a single public event involving both the campus and the wider community. We also proposed to spend $1,500 as incentives for student organizations to sponsor public dialogues.
**Actual Use of Funds**

We began the 2008 calendar year with a balance of $15,082; at the close of the grant period, the balance was $436.

Two developments affected our use of funds during this period. First, in response to evaluation data gathered during the project’s first year, we substituted a mini-grant program for the proposed campus/community dialogue. Mini-grants were available as incentives and support to faculty, staff, and student organizations wishing to organize difficult dialogues. With budgets of up to $500, mini-grant awardees spent funds primarily on publicity and food. Second, our student worker was unable to work as many hours as anticipated. Funds budgeted for her salary were re-allocated to the mini-grant program and to stipends for the project directors who took on her administrative tasks.

**Goals and Objectives**

**Proposed Goals and Objectives**

The primary goal of UNO’s Difficult Dialogues initiative was to change the campus culture by integrating dialogue into courses and co-curricular activities. We proposed to institutionalize a process by which faculty, staff, and students could learn to talk with one another about difficult issues in a climate of active inquiry and exploration, openness to difference, and mutual respect.

Specific objectives were these:
- To introduce dialogue theory and practice to faculty and staff
- To effect change in the curriculum
- To promote and support co-curricular programming addressing controversial and sensitive issues.

A secondary goal was to encourage and support difficult dialogues in the community.

**Changes**

The project’s primary goal remained unchanged.

The objective of introducing dialogue theory and practice to faculty and staff remained unchanged.

The objective of effecting change in the curriculum did not change, though our language for describing it became more precise. We came to understand that the problem we’d identified was more a matter of pedagogy than of curriculum. Professors assigned materials that raised sensitive issues, but they were dissatisfied with the discussions these materials elicited. From the dialogue training, they sought an understanding of communication that would inform their teaching techniques.
The objective of supporting co-curricular programming addressing controversial issues remained unchanged.

The goal of supporting dialogue in the community remained unchanged, though its place was more clearly secondary as we came to appreciate the importance of building a strong foundation on campus before extending the project’s scope.

Activities

With unlimited money, time, and personnel, the goals described above would be ambitious. Within the constraints of our project – one hundred thousand dollars, two years, three busy faculty members as co-directors – they could be achieved only by very intentionally maximizing the impact of available resources. During the first year, we focused on establishing a core group of faculty and staff trained in dialogue and committed to open discussion and on planning a public event to introduce dialogue to the campus community. As a result, the project entered its second year with a large cohort of faculty and staff prepared to step into leadership roles – to share their knowledge with students and colleagues and to organize opportunities for difficult dialogue in classrooms, in the co-curriculum, and in the community.

The project’s reach widened over the course of twenty-eight months. In the paragraphs below, we explain the proposed activities, then the activities organized by the project directors, and finally the larger set of activities set in motion by staff, faculty, and student leaders who drew upon training, motivation, and support provided by the campus-wide initiative.

Proposed Activities

We proposed five professional-development activities for faculty and staff:

- A Dialogue Workshop in May, 2006 for a core group consisting of 20 faculty, 10 staff, and 3 administrators;
- A Core Group Reunion in August, 2006 to reinforce lessons learned in the workshop and to articulate plans for the 06-07 academic year;
- Dialogue Circles, small groups of faculty and staff meeting monthly to share ideas, offer mutual support, and extend their understanding of dialogue to selected colleagues;
- A day-long Dialogue Refresher for the Core Group in August, 2007;
- Brown-bag presentations for faculty and staff in the Core Group to share their experiences with colleagues.

In addition, we proposed offering incentives to student organizations to organize opportunities for difficult dialogue outside the classroom.

Finally, we proposed two dialogue events, a Dialogue Watch in the spring of 2007 and a Community Dialogue in the spring of 2008.
Completed Activities initiated by the project directors

As proposed, the project was launched by a weeklong Dialogue Workshop in May, 2006. Faculty and staff attended the workshop by invitation and were paid $700 for their attendance and their commitment to function as the project’s Core Group over a two-year period. We invited people who seemed most likely to maximize the project’s impact: faculty who taught General Education courses, especially English classes focusing on argumentation and classes meeting the diversity requirement; and staff with key positions in Student Affairs. Overall, we gave preference to members of the campus community who had demonstrated an interest in diversity and a talent for leadership. Three university administrators also attended the workshop: the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Services, the Director of Multicultural Affairs, and the Associate Director of Human Resources.

The Dialogue Workshop was facilitated by Stephen Littlejohn and Leslie Fagre of the Public Dialogue Consortium. They offered an introduction to dialogue theory, lessons for facilitators, discussion of dialogue in the classroom, and opportunities to practice dialogue in a variety of formats.

The core group met on two more occasions. At the Core Group Reunion in August, 2006, members described their plans to integrate dialogue into their work during AY 06-07. Stephen Littlejohn returned to Omaha in August, 2007 for a Dialogue Refresher. This daylong meeting gave core group members an opportunity to reflect on a full year’s experience with Difficult Dialogues and to discuss both their individual plans and the direction of the project for AY 07-08.

During both AY 06-07 and AY 07-08, we organized Dialogue Circles which met monthly, usually including five or six members of the core group and interested colleagues. The activities of the circles varied with the needs of the participants. One group, for example, read and discussed dialogue theory, beginning with Littlejohn and Domenici’s book Mediation. Others focused on specific issues (race or sexuality). Still others functioned as design teams to plan public dialogues on campus.

Materials that illustrate these professional-development activities are collected in Appendix A.

In addition, we sponsored dialogue events. The three project directors, with five other members of the core group, formed a design team to plan the event we had originally envisioned as Dialogue Watch. On March 8, 2007, more than 120 students, faculty, and staff gathered in the ballroom of the student union for “What Omaha Do You Live In? Talking Openly about Race and Identity.” After an opening exercise led by community activist Joe Gerstandt, participants learned about the goals and characteristics of dialogue, went over a set of ground rules, and then sat at tables of seven or eight to engage in a dialogue structured by three questions about their experiences with race and racism in Omaha. Materials produced for this event appear in Appendix B.
The Difficult Dialogues project played a supporting role in “By the People,” a public deliberation organized by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and Nebraska Educational Television. Staff from the Public Policy Center selected a random sampling of 100 Omaha residents and brought them together on the UNO campus to discuss the implications of immigration for our state. The participants were divided into small groups moderated by members of the Difficult Dialogues core group. The small-group discussions were videotaped, and the resulting program was broadcast on public television.

Throughout AY 07-08, the project sponsored a Mini-grant Program to support dialogues initiated by faculty, staff, and student organizations. The directors’ responsibilities were to publicize the grant opportunity, review applications, consult as needed about the structure of dialogue and logistics of event planning, and manage the program budget.

In May of 2008, we brought the project to a close with a Difficult Dialogues finale. The event began with a de-briefing; participants reflected on the project, assessed its impact, and discussed sustainability. We showed the Difficult Dialogues documentary video, recognized core group members and mini-grant awardees, and shared a dinner.

**Completed Activities initiated by faculty, staff, and students**

*Difficult dialogues in classrooms.* Faculty have reported making changes to curriculum and/or pedagogy in twelve academic programs across campus. These include Black Studies (Introduction to Black Studies), Criminal Justice (Criminal Court System, Terrorism, Drugs and Crime), English (English Composition, Introduction to English Literature, African American English), Geography (History and Philosophy of Geography), Journalism (News Editing), Native American Studies (Native American Literature), Political Science (International Political Economics), Religion (Introduction to World Religions, Women in Islam), Sociology (Introduction to Sociology), Speech Communication (Race, Ethnicity and Identity; Intercultural Communication; Gender and Communication), Teacher Education (Critical Pedagogy), and Women’s Studies (Introduction to Women’s Studies).

The English Department’s composition program is of particular interest because argumentation is a topic of study, students’ papers frequently address our focal issues, and the 170 sections offered each year enroll over 3,200 students. Five composition instructors were included in the core group. In the fall of 2007, the program revised its list of objectives to include “active listening.” One writing teacher describes the change to her courses as follows:

Under “Course Description and Objectives,” I added the following sentence [to the syllabus]: “... students will learn and practice techniques for engaging in productive dialogue on controversial issues, with the goal to increase discovery and understanding, thereby becoming more effective writers and citizens.” During the first week of classes, I gave a brief introduction to Dialogue as we have been using the term, and the classes set up their ground rules.
Similar changes have been incorporated into courses co-taught by counselors in the First-Year Experience program.

The nature of dialogue activities varies with the demands of particular courses. For example, a professor of Criminal Justice incorporated the “dialogue-to-action” model into her class on Drugs and Crime, inviting students to consider concrete ways to address correlations between drug arrests and race/ethnicity; in a graduate course, she introduced the “small-circles” model to address the differential treatment of homosexuals and minorities in the court system. In International Political Economies, where the ideologies of conservative American students often clash with those of international students, the professor designated every Friday as an opportunity for facilitated dialogue. In two Communication courses, dialogue techniques were incorporated to help students process service-learning activities. In other courses, faculty experimented with creating online formats for dialogue.

Two core group members developed a presentation on teaching with dialogue which they shared with the teaching staff in International Studies and Programs. Similarly, the core group member from Criminal Justice spoke about dialogue to her colleagues and to graduate students in the department’s pedagogy seminar.

*Dialogue in interactions with colleagues and students.* Core group members reported that their understanding of dialogue influenced their interactions with students and colleagues.

Staff participants in the core group have intentionally integrated dialogic communication into their work practices. For example, when members of a campus organization were involved in and/or witnessed inappropriate “joking” about homosexuality, they asked a core group member from Counseling to intervene. She facilitated a structured two-hour dialogue about the incident. The Coordinator of Disability Services and the campus Judicial Officer changed their protocols for working with students, beginning interactions by listening and asking open-ended questions. The Assistant Director of Human Resources made similar changes in her role as an employee-relations mediator. The coach of the women’s basketball team consulted with the Athletic Director, the Student-Athlete Advisory Board, and the Coordinator of the Student-Athlete Life Skills Program to develop dialogue opportunities for athletes dealing with such issues as competing on Sundays and working with teammates whose ethnicity or sexual orientation differed from their own.

Both faculty and staff report that many opportunities for dialogue have arisen spontaneously in the course of their daily work. Dialogue techniques have found their way into advising sessions, into consultations at the Writing Center, and into professors’ interactions with students or colleagues engaged in conflict, whether the source of conflict was ideological or personal. One faculty member wrote, “In general I have tried to be less judgmental toward both students and colleagues. I have also tried to be more patient, to let them get their point across. I have also tried to be a better listener more (as opposed to forming my response as they are speaking).” The director of Women Studies reported, “I now practice ‘deep’ Dialogue-type listening in at least 50% of my one-on-one interactions with students and colleagues. . . . People feel as though they’ve been heard and respected, interactions are more
effective and efficient, as misunderstandings are minimized. Relationships are built and deepened. . . . Participation in Difficult Dialogues deepened and extended my skills in this regard."

*Dialogue in community outreach.* The University of Nebraska at Omaha is a metropolitan university whose faculty and staff are fully engaged with the community. As the Difficult Dialogues project gained momentum on campus, it created ripple effects in the community. For example, a Criminal Justice professor introduced dialogue techniques to members of the Nebraska Department of Corrections to help them facilitate community meetings on prisoner re-entry. An English professor called upon his training in dialogue at a meeting of the Lavender Languages Conferences, where he suggested dialogue as an alternative to debate for scholars seeking to influence public discourse about gay rights.

A political scientist at UNO moderates national meetings that bring together representatives of several transgender organizations; she made use of dialogue facilitation skills in those meetings. Similarly, the English Department coordinator, who works with the Speakers’ Bureau at PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) reported that he called upon his Difficult Dialogues training in presentations at UNO and the local community college.

*Public dialogue events.* In the fall of 2006, several members of the core group worked collaboratively with other organizations at UNO to offer a Friday Film Festival. Sponsors included the office of Multicultural Affairs, Student Leadership and Organizations, Cultural Awareness Programs and Organizations, and Project Achieve. The group selected films focused on controversial issues — *Bowling for Columbine, North Country, Crash, El Norte*, and ten others — following screenings with facilitated dialogues.

During the 2007-08 Academic Year, the mini-grant program supported eleven public dialogues:

*Black on Black: African Born and American Born*
Grantee: Matthew Smith
Sponsors: Phi Beta Sigma, African-American Organization, Pan-African Student Organization, Circle of Brotherhood
Date: November 29, 2007
Attendance: 70+
In an open-mic discussion, participants explored the tension between African-born and American-born blacks. Participants included UNO students, staff, and faculty as well as visitors from Creighton University and the Omaha community. In a lively discussion, they shared their perceptions of both groups, the experiences that led to those perceptions, and the consequences of mutual misunderstanding.

*Women in Islam*
Grantee: Shafiquil Islam
Sponsor: Muslim Students’ Association
Date: December 7, 2007
Attendance: 67
A panel of non-Muslim and Muslim women, including some UNO students and community members recruited through local mosques, discussed their experiences in this country and the widespread perception of Muslim women as oppressed. The moderator invited questions and comments from all in attendance.

*Anti-Racism Task Force*
Grantee: Professor Peggy Jones, Black Studies
Date: January 19, 2008
Attendance: 73
This event was organized by an Anti-Racism Task Force made up of campus and community leaders. Prior to the dialogue, participants were asked to read *The Heart of Whiteness* by Robert Jensen and “Omaha in Black and White,” a series of articles in the *Omaha World-Herald* documenting dramatic differences in income and education across racial lines. After an icebreaker, participants broke into groups of 10-12 for facilitated discussion of questions about issues raised by the readings. At the end of the day, participants at two tables made arrangements for further dialogue opportunities.

*What Omaha Do You Live In? An International Perspective*
Grantee: Lori Arias, International Programs
Date: February 7, 2008
Attendance: 99
As its title suggests, this event was modeled on the campus-wide dialogue held the previous spring. Like the original “What Omaha,” it was planned by a design team, and preparations included training workshops for facilitators. After an introduction to dialogue, participants sat in mixed groups – some lifelong U.S. residents, some international students – discussing questions such as “What are some of the similarities between your culture and the host culture where you have lived?” and “What is the greatest misperception others have about your culture?”

*Black on Black II: African Born and American Born*
Grantee: Joanna LeFlore
Date: February 7, 2008
Attendance: 20
The Black on Black dialogue begun in November raised questions and issues that warranted further discussion. This dialogue was also designed to uncover prejudices and overcome social barriers between African-born and African-American students. The open-mic format was retained, but in this smaller group, there was opportunity for deeper reflection and more back-and-forth exchange.

*Telling It Like It Is: High School Minority Students Talk to Future Educators*
Grantee: Carol Lloyd Rozansky, Teacher Education
Date: February 11, 2008
Attendance: 80
Professor Rozansky organized this dialogue in collaboration with Ken Butts, advisor to the Omaha Public Schools High School Minority Leaders Student Achievement Task Force. After an introductory presentation about the “achievement gap,” eight high school student leaders sat as a panel, each making a brief statement addressed to novice teachers. Participants – mostly pre-service teachers and several professors in Teacher Education – asked questions of the panelists and broke into small discussion groups.

Women of Faith: Muslim, Christian, Jew
Grantees: Lori Young and Fred Richart
Sponsor: United Christian Ministries in Higher Education
Date: March, 2008
Attendance: 14

What UNO Do You Attend?
Grantees: Barbara Janousek-Treadway and Sharif Liwaru
Sponsor: Student Organizations and Leadership Programs
Date: April 1, 2008
Attendance: 35
Students active in student organizations met during Greek Week to discuss how the organizations could be more inclusive and to gain practice in dialogue participation and facilitation.

Developing Cross-Cultural Professor-Student Relationships
Grantees: Monica Green, James Freeman
Sponsor: Multicultural Affairs
Date: April 8, 2008
Attendance: 30
A group of white professors met in one room to discuss their experiences working with students of color; simultaneously, students of color met in another room to discuss their experiences in classes at UNO. The two conversations were videotaped, and each group had the opportunity to hear and react to what the other group had said.

Muslims in America
Grantee: Bridget Blomfield, Religion
Date: April 11, 2008
Attendance: 100
Students in Professor Blomfield’s class on Islam organized this opportunity for the campus community to consider stereotypes of Islam and American Muslims. They collected provocative images of Muslims which were assembled into a PowerPoint slide show. At the public event, each image was projected on a screen for five minutes and participants said what it evoked for them; Blomfield’s students facilitated the ensuing discussions.

*The Power of Diversity*

Grantee: Jeannette Seaberry, Counseling and the Goodrich Scholarship Program
Date: May 22
Attendance: 20

Students in the Goodrich Scholarship Program read *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies* by Scott Page. After discussing the book among themselves, they met to plan a dialogue presented as part of the annual Conference on the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed.

From November of 2007 to May of 2008, over 600 people – UNO faculty, staff, students, administrators, and community members – came together for mini-grant funded dialogues about race and religion.

*Rationale for changing activities*

The most significant change from the proposed to the completed activities was the creation of a mini-grant program in the project’s second year. We instituted the program in response to feedback from participants at our first public dialogue, “What Omaha Do You Live In?” held in the spring of 2007. On evaluation forms, many participants requested that the university offer more opportunities for dialogue.

Recognizing that the single campus-community dialogue originally proposed for the spring of 2008 was not adequate to satisfy this level of interest, we established mini-grants to capitalize on the ideas and energy of the core group and other faculty, staff, and students. The mini-grant program essentially extended the proposed incentives for student organizations to the whole campus community. It made it possible for us to support dialogues on a wide range of issues.

Because so many public dialogues were held on campus, the proposed brown-bag series was unnecessary. Rather than hear what core group members had to say about dialogue, people could learn experientially by participating in dialogue events.
Outcomes

Expected

UNO’s Difficult Dialogues program was designed to change the campus culture from one of silence, in which sensitive issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation were rarely the focus of open conversation, to a culture of openness, in which active inquiry and genuine dialogue on these potentially difficult issues would be frequent, normal, and valued. To achieve this cultural change, we identified five major outcomes we expected to produce as the project progressed, with each accomplished outcome creating momentum needed to achieve subsequent outcomes.

The first outcome we expected to produce was a core group of faculty and staff members who would be prepared to plan and lead dialogues on campus about controversial issues. As a result of their participation in our first project activity -- a week-long dialogue workshop -- we expected this core group to report having increased knowledge and understanding of dialogue as an instructional method and form of communication, more confidence in their skills to facilitate dialogue in classrooms and campus settings, and greater motivation and commitment to incorporate dialogue into university courses and co-curricular programs.

The second expected outcome, resulting from the first, was an increase in the sheer number of campus dialogues on issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation. We expected our core group to incorporate dialogue into class discussions, especially in courses that fulfill the university’s general education and diversity requirements. We also expected them to integrate dialogues on race, religion, and sexual orientation into other campus forums, such as special dialogue events, meetings of student clubs and organizations, and daily interactions with students and coworkers.

Third, we expected UNO students, faculty, and staff who participated in difficult dialogues to be impacted by their experiences. As a result of their participation, we expected respondents to be better prepared to communicate constructively about race, religion, and sexual orientation. We expected them to be more willing to speak openly, honestly, and respectfully about their views and experiences, and more willing to listen to and try to understand perspectives that differed from their own.

The fourth anticipated outcome was that the behavior of initiating dialogues would cascade beyond our core group to other members of the campus community. We expected students, faculty, and staff members from across the campus who participated in Difficult Dialogues activities to become skilled and motivated to initiate their own dialogues on issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Our fifth expected outcome was that dialogue participation would cascade beyond the campus, flowing into the community. We expected members of the UNO campus to partner with community members to plan and facilitate dialogues on issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation. We also expected to strengthen our campus-community partnerships so
that community leaders would be more likely to turn to UNO as a resource and partner for leading difficult dialogues in the future.

Achieved

All of our expected outcomes were achieved to some degree during the two-year period of the grant, and we have reason to anticipate that the cultural changes on our campus will reverberate and continue to have impact.

Outcome 1: Core group of campus leaders. The UNO Difficult Dialogues program successfully produced a core group who, early in the grant period, became prepared and motivated to lead campus dialogues on difficult issues related to race, religion, and sexual orientation. This core group of 33 campus leaders -- including 20 faculty, 10 staff, and 3 administrators -- reported greater knowledge, skills, and motivation to incorporate dialogue into university courses and co-curricular programs.

Outcome 2: Increased opportunities for dialogue in courses and co-curricular activities. We saw a dramatic increase in the number of campus dialogues on issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation. The core group took action to begin producing this outcome almost immediately after the dialogue workshop in May 2006.

Outcome 3: Positive impact of dialogue participation. Dialogue participants were increasingly willing and able to communicate openly and constructively about race, religion, and sexual orientation. UNO students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members developed a greater willingness to freely and productively express their views and experiences and to listen to and try to comprehend differing perspectives. Above all else, participants called for more opportunities to participate in difficult dialogues on campus.

Outcome 4: Integration of dialogue into the campus culture. The project succeeded in producing a cascade of dialogues across campus, initiated by members of the campus community. Students, faculty, and staff members beyond the initial core group became motivated to plan and facilitate dialogues focusing on a wide range of issues related to race, religion, and sexual orientation. Core group members served as a support system, providing consultation, dialogue facilitation training, and facilitation services for the rest of the campus.

Outcome 5: Community involvement. We successfully extended the Difficult Dialogues program into the community by involving community members in campus dialogues on race, religion, and sexual orientation. Campus-community partnerships were strengthened as members of the community helped to plan campus dialogues and took part in dialogues as participants.

Supporting Evidence/Indicators of Success:

Evidence of outcome 1: Core group of campus leaders. We gathered data from the core group before and after the May 2006 workshop to evaluate the impact of the workshop on
their readiness to lead classroom and campus dialogues on difficult issues related to race, religion, and sexual orientation. Prior to the workshop, only 25% of the core group agreed that they had “knowledge of specific techniques and formats for facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom or in co-curricular activities.” After the workshop, 97% of the core group members agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Similarly, only 55% of the participants agreed before the workshop that they were “a skilled facilitator of dialogues on controversial and sensitive issues” in the classroom or in co-curricular activities. After the workshop, 77% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with this self-description. Not surprisingly, 100% of the group reported being motivated to make a positive difference in the campus community on issues of diversity, both before and after the workshop. The results of the workshop pre- and post-tests are displayed in Appendix A.

We also gathered data from the core group at the end of the two-year project to assess the longitudinal impact of the workshop and the Difficult Dialogues project as a whole. At the end of the grant period, a full 90% of core group respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were “skilled facilitators of dialogues on controversial and sensitive issues.” One hundred percent of the group reported continued motivation to make a positive difference in the campus community on issues of diversity at the end of the grant period.

Evidence of outcome 2: Increased opportunities for dialogue in courses and co-curricular activities. The core group submitted “activity updates” at set intervals throughout the project, providing rich, qualitative evidence that the UNO Difficult Dialogues program created numerous dialogue opportunities on campus. These updates describe how faculty and staff in the core group incorporated dialogues on race, religion, and sexual orientation into courses, co-curricular activities, formal meetings, and interpersonal interactions. Of the core group members with teaching responsibilities, 80% reported that their teaching changed as a result of the Difficult Dialogues program. Faculty members reported incorporating dialogue into 21 courses in 12 different academic programs across campus. Staff members reported incorporating dialogue into eight different types of co-curricular programs and activities. Core group members reported planning and sponsoring five major co-curricular dialogue events and serving as consultants and facilitators for seven additional difficult dialogues focusing on race, religion, and sexual orientation. They also reported initiating opportunities for dialogue in their routine interactions with students and coworkers. These reported activities are described in the “Activities” section of this report.

Evidence of outcome 3: Positive impact of dialogue participation. More than 720 students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members participated in public dialogues sponsored by the UNO Difficult Dialogues program, including 120 at “What Omaha Do You Live In” in year one of the program and over 600 at the dialogues sponsored by mini-grants in year two. Of these participants, nearly 500 respondents completed “Impact of Dialogue Participation” (IDP) questionnaires (described in the “Baselines, Tools, and Approaches to Evaluation” section of this report), which we used to assess the impact of participating in UNO difficult dialogues.
In the first year, 96 respondents had an average total score of 9.14 on the six-item IDP instrument, with a lower score indicating a more positive impact, and the possible scores ranging from 6 to 30. Frequency analysis of the scores shows that 90% of the respondents perceived that their participation in our campus-wide dialogue, “What Omaha Do You Live In? Talking Openly About Race and Identity,” positively affected their willingness to express themselves freely and listen to points of view that differed from their own. Examination of the six items composing IDP revealed that a great majority of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that they were comfortable sharing their views and experiences during the dialogue (92%), that the other participants were “really listening” to them (99%), and that as a result of participation, they felt more willing to speak openly about their experiences and views (86%). An overwhelming majority of the participants also strongly agreed or agreed that they felt more willing to listen with an open mind to differing perspectives as a result of participating in dialogue (89%), that they had heard a variety of perspectives (93%), and that they had gained a better understanding of how the issues being discussed affect people’s lives (84%).

Analysis of the IDP data gathered during the second year of the project revealed equally favorable results. The 397 respondents scored an average of 9.08 on the overall scale, with a lower score indicating more positive impact of participation, and the possible scores ranging from 6 to 30. The distribution of total scores suggested that 91% of the participants perceived dialogue as positively influencing their willingness to engage in free expression and listen to diverse perspectives. Frequency analysis of the six IDP items showed that the participants overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed that they were comfortable sharing their views and experiences during the dialogue (91%), that the other participants were “really listening” to them (95%), and that as a result of their participation, they felt more willing to speak openly about their experiences and views (83%). Similarly, the large majority of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they had become more willing to listen with an open mind to differing perspectives as a result of the dialogue (91%), that they had heard a variety of perspectives (95%), and that they had gained a better understanding of how the issues being discussed affect people’s lives (90%).

Evidence of outcome 4: Integration of dialogue into the campus culture. Perhaps the most telling evidence that our campus culture has changed – that the UNO difficult dialogues program has successfully “broken silence” on difficult issues -- is that students, faculty, and staff from across the campus, beyond the core group, began to demand additional dialogue opportunities and organized difficult dialogues themselves. At the end of the first year of the program, 23% of the participants in our “What Omaha Do You Live In?” dialogue on race and identity called for “More dialogues!” in their open-ended comments on our post-dialogue questionnaires.

These spontaneous cries for more dialogue were transformed into action in the second year of the program. As information about Difficult Dialogues continued to cascade over the campus through publicity and word-of-mouth, seven students, faculty, and staff members who were not part of the core group applied for and received Difficult Dialogues mini-grants to sponsor dialogue events. It is noteworthy that the energy for more dialogues continued to flow
throughout the second year; 25% of the participants who wrote open-ended comments on their post-dialogue surveys spontaneously requested additional dialogue opportunities in courses and co-curricular activities.

Evidence of outcome 5: Community involvement. Our success in spreading difficult dialogues into the community is evidenced by the participation of community members in dialogue events on campus. In the first year of the program, we invited a diversity expert from the community to lead an ice-breaker for the “What Omaha Do You Live In?” dialogue on race and identity, and in year two, community members served on the design teams for two of the mini-grant-funded dialogues (“Women of Faith” and “Anti-Racism”). Community members also participated in seven Difficult Dialogues events in the second year. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian members of the community were specifically invited to two dialogues (“Women in Islam” and “Women of Faith”). Black community members who were African Born or American Born were invited to campus to participate in the “Black on Black” dialogues, high school students of color played a central role in the “Telling It Like It Is” dialogue, and community participants of all races and ethnicities took part in the “Anti-Racism” dialogue and in “What Omaha Do You Live In? An International Perspective.”

An unexpected indicator of community involvement occurred during the second year of the program, when the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center in Lincoln, Nebraska contacted us to request dialogue facilitation services for a “By the People” deliberative poll that was organized in Omaha for over 100 community members.

Local media attention and state and national conference presentations are additional indicators that the UNO Difficult Dialogues program extended beyond our campus. In the second year of the program, the Omaha World-Herald published two articles on our Anti-Racism dialogue, resulting in higher community participation than in any other dialogue event we sponsored.

The project directors also have presented our work at regional and national conferences. In March of 2007, Shereen Bingham presented “Difficult Dialogues at the University of Nebraska at Omaha” at the Nebraska Women in Higher Education Leadership Conference, and in October of 2007, she presented “Dialogue, Debate, and Negotiation in Learning Communities: Using Constructive Communication to Talk and Teach About Gender” at the national conference of the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender. In March of 2008, Nora Bacon presented “Difficult Dialogues: Salvaging Communication in an Era of Polarized Discourse” at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans.
Baselines, Tools, and Approaches to Evaluation

Baselines established prior to assessment/evaluation activities

Three types of baseline data were collected before the project began, including focus group conversations with faculty, staff, and administrators; a pre-workshop survey of the difficult dialogues core group; and campus-wide surveys of faculty and students.

Focus group conversations were conducted in 2005 with 21 members of the university faculty and staff. Participants were selected using the purposeful sampling method to include a broad range of participants. The focus groups included 13 faculty members from four of our seven colleges; six administrators (the Associate Vice Chancellor and Assistant Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, the campus judicial officer, the associate dean of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service, and the director of the Service-Learning Academy); and three staff members (the president of the Staff Advisory Council, the coordinator of the Hate Crimes Project, and a teaching specialist from Multicultural Affairs).

The focus group discussions were organized by three open-ended questions. We asked participants what, in their experience, happens when race, religion, and sexual orientation are discussed on campus, whether they felt prepared to lead discussion of difficult issues, and what skills or training they would need to lead such discussions more effectively. Our thematic analysis of the transcribed conversations resulted in three important qualitative baselines. First, we found that students, faculty, and staff at UNO often avoided confronting issues of race, religion, and sexual orientation because they were afraid the conversations would not be constructive. Second, we learned that although instructors had a wide range of strategies for managing discussion of difficult issues in class, many still felt ill prepared. Third, we discovered a perceived need and shared desire to strengthen the ability of students, faculty, and staff to have open and constructive conversations about difficult issues related to race, religion, and sexual orientation.

We collected a second type of baseline data from our core group of faculty and staff members in May 2006, before the project activities began. This assessment was a self-report survey consisting of Likert-type self-report items and open-ended questions to assess the participants’ perceptions of their readiness to lead difficult dialogues. The quantitative data showed that only 55% of the participants agreed that they were “a skilled facilitator of dialogues on controversial and sensitive issues” in the classroom or in co-curricular activities. Only 25% of the participants agreed that they had “knowledge of specific techniques and formats for facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom or in co-curricular activities.” In response to open-ended survey questions, participants identified a need to strengthen their skills and abilities as dialogue facilitators. They expressed interest in learning techniques for encouraging full and balanced participation, asking effective and stimulating questions, listening deeply and patiently, responding without judgment, helping participants feel safe, encouraging respect, handling emotionally charged conflicts.
constructively, and bringing closure to dialogue so participants walk away with the sense that it was worthwhile.

The third type of baseline data depended on campus surveys. The UNO Office of Institutional Research conducted a campus-wide survey in 2005, before the Difficult Dialogues project began, to elicit self-report responses from students. We selected items from the survey to establish baselines on student behavior and beliefs about the university. The behavioral items measured students’ self-reports that they often or very often asked questions or participated in class discussions (first year 53%, seniors 69%), often or very often included diverse perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments (first year 57%, seniors 63%), often or very often had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than their own (first year 41%, seniors 44%), and often or very often had serious conversations with students who were very different from themselves in terms of religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values (first year 47%, seniors 48%). The belief items established students’ agreement or strong agreement that UNO had contributed to their understanding of people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds (first year 50%, seniors 51%); that campus services and support encouraged contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds (first year 44%, seniors 39%); and that the university experience had contributed to students’ understanding of today’s international and multicultural world (first year 43%, seniors 44%). Overall, these data suggest that before we initiated the difficult dialogues project on our campus, most of our students did not often participate in open conversations about difficult issues of race, ethnicity, or religion with others who did not share their views.

The UNO Office of Institutional Research also surveyed the university faculty in 2005 using the UCLA Faculty Survey. We selected items from the survey to supply baseline data on faculty behaviors and beliefs. The behavioral items measured faculty members’ use of particular teaching methods and materials in “most” or “all” of the courses they teach, including class discussion (86%), readings on racial and ethnic issues (23%), and readings on women and gender issues (22%). The belief items measured the degree to which faculty perceived that racial and ethnic diversity should be more strongly reflected in the university curriculum (61%), and that respect for the expression of diverse values and beliefs is “very descriptive” of our institution (32%). These baseline responses suggested that prior to the Difficult Dialogues initiative, relatively few faculty members on our campus were incorporating issues of race, ethnicity, and gender into their course materials, and most of the faculty respondents perceived that the expression of diverse values and beliefs was not well respected on our campus.

**Instruments and methods used for assessment and evaluation purposes**

We developed several instruments to assess and evaluate the success of the project.

*Workshop assessment questionnaire.* The self-evaluation described in the section on establishment of baselines was used to assess the impact of our dialogue workshop on the core group of campus leaders (see Appendix D). The instrument, which was used to collect
data from the core group before and after the dialogue workshop in 2006, consisted of items measuring participants’ knowledge and understanding of dialogue and dialogue facilitation techniques, confidence in their skill to facilitate dialogue in classrooms and co-curricular settings, and motivation/commitment to make a positive difference on our campus in areas of race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Activity reports. To document our core group’s efforts to integrate difficult dialogues into courses and campus activities, we developed an “Activity Update” form, which the core group members completed at three points during the project (December 2006, August 2007, and May 2008). The forms included instructions and a table in which respondents listed and described their activities related to difficult dialogues and indicated the number of people involved (see Appendix D). The updates provided detailed documentation of the work being done by the core group “on the ground” to integrate dialogue theory, skills, and activities into courses, co-curricular activities, formal meetings, and interpersonal interactions.

The Impact of Dialogue Participation Scale (IDP). To assess our third outcome, the impact of participation in difficult dialogues on individual participants, we developed the “Impact of Dialogue Participation” instrument (IDP), which participants completed at the end of each of the 12 major dialogue events (see Appendix D). The IDP is composed of six items: (1) “When I spoke, I felt like others were really listening,” (2) “I felt comfortable sharing my views and experiences,” (3) “In today’s dialogue, I heard a variety of perspectives,” (4) “As a result of today’s dialogue, I have a better understanding of how [this issue] affects people’s lives,” (5) “As a result of today’s dialogue, I feel more willing to listen with an open mind to differing perspectives,” and (6) “As a result of today’s dialogue, I feel more willing to speak openly about my experiences and views.” During the two-year grant period, 493 participants responded to each of the six items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree). The item means ranged from 1.39 to 1.66, with standard deviations ranging from .60 to .80. Reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha) indicated a satisfactory overall instrument reliability of .80.

“Reports out” from the core group. Each workshop and meeting of the core group involved small group discussions and “reports out” to the whole group. Key points from these reports were recorded on flip charts and transcribed. These data did not provide direct evidence of the program’s overall success, but they provided valuable feedback and enabled us to make adjustments in the project. One example of this process took place at the Core Group Refresher in August 2007. We learned at that workshop that several group members were dissatisfied with the Dialogue Circles; the purpose of the Circles was modified in the second year in response to the identified concerns.

Office of Institutional Research campus surveys. Select items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and UCLA Faculty Survey, which were distributed on our campus by the UNO Office of Institutional Research, were used to examine the overall campus culture. The items we selected measured student and faculty behaviors and beliefs prior to and after the project (as described in the “Establishment of Baselines” section of this report). However, analysis of the post-project data was delayed and the Office of Institutional
Research was unable to make the results available to us in time to incorporate them into our final report. Even if these data were available, we would be concerned about their validity because so many forces over a two-year grant period can affect a campus culture in ways relevant to the difficult dialogues project. Instead, we used the institutional data as a baseline, documenting the critical need for Difficult Dialogues on our campus.

**Uses of assessment/evaluation activities**

The assessment/evaluation instruments that we developed were used both for program improvement and at the end of the program.

We used the dialogue workshop assessment questionnaire early in the program to assess the effectiveness of the May 2006 dialogue workshop. The results of the post-workshop survey informed us that our core group of faculty and staff participants was ready to lead the campus by integrating dialogue into courses and co-curricular activities. If the post-workshop results had not revealed improvement in the core group’s dialogue facilitation knowledge and skills, it would have been necessary for us to provide additional training (formative evaluation). We also used items from the same questionnaire for summative evaluation, measuring change that occurred in the core group’s perceptions of their facilitation skills at the end of the program.

The qualitative data gathered by means of Activity Update forms also were used for formative and summative evaluation. The forms enabled us to monitor the degree to which the core group was integrating dialogues on race, religion, and sexual orientation into their courses and co-curricular activities. Reviewing these updates before the Core Group Reunion in August 2006 and the Core Group Refresher in August 2007 helped us tailor these events to the group. The updates also provided detailed descriptions that we used at the end of the program to document how extensively the core group had integrated dialogue activities into the campus culture.

The Impact of Dialogue Participation (IDP) scale provided ongoing feedback (formative evaluation) about how the campus community was responding to Difficult Dialogues events. Analysis of the responses on this instrument at the end of the first year prompted us to modify our plans for year two. We also used the IDP scale at the end of the program to assess the impact of program events on participants (summative evaluation).

Finally, as noted earlier, we regularly used small group discussions and “reports out” from the core group for formative evaluation, to identify problems that were occurring and develop ways to address them as the project progressed.

**Sustainability**

From the outset, our goal has been to use the two years of the project’s duration to achieve effects that would be self-sustaining. It was in the interest of sustainability that we focused on the campus climate rather than a single program or event and on teaching dialogue as a
process rather than addressing a single issue. We expect that five years from now, the impact of the Difficult Dialogues project will still be visible at UNO in courses, in co-curricular activities, and in daily interactions among members of the campus community.

Difficult Dialogues will have its longest-lasting impact in those academic programs where faculty learned how to facilitate dialogue and gained confidence about introducing sensitive issues into the classroom. While almost every department that was represented in the core group has seen some impact, the most significant transformations have occurred in Communication, English, Black Studies, Criminal Justice, Religion, and Women Studies. In the School of Communication, a new course called “Difficult Dialogues” is in development.

The Difficult Dialogues project was embraced with particular enthusiasm by staff in International Affairs, Counseling, and Student Organizations and Leadership Programs. Staff in these programs have strong a commitment to dialogue about human difference; as a result of the project, they are better equipped to act on that commitment. We expect to see continuing use of dialogue in spontaneous interactions in these settings and more opportunities for public dialogue initiated by student organizations.

Our community outreach effort is still in its infancy. Data gathered at the end of the first year suggested that our campus was not prepared to extend our resources as dialogue planners and facilitators into the community as extensively as we had anticipated. The demand for additional dialogue opportunities on campus was still too great, and our core group’s efforts were stretched thin by plans for on-campus dialogues. The decision to use grant funds to support on-campus dialogues during the second year of the program through mini-grants was pivotal to the overall success of the project. Now wiser and more experienced at the end of our second year, the campus is prepared to be a truly valuable resource for dialogues in the community.

**Reflections**

Our participation in the Difficult Dialogues Initiative has been a source of great pleasure and pride to us and to our colleagues, especially those in the core group who contributed so much to its success. Before the project began, we knew that UNO faculty and staff were genuinely interested in creating more opportunities for open, active inquiry into race, religion, sexual orientation, and other sensitive issues. We knew that students were eager to explore human difference. Nevertheless, we were surprised by the degree to which the campus embraced Difficult Dialogues – by the number of faculty and staff who wanted to attend the initial Dialogue Workshop, by the support of university administrators at every level from our chairs to the chancellor, by the many people who stepped forward to organize public dialogue events and the many hundreds who took time out of their lives to participate in them. The success of the project can, in large part, be attributed to the fit between what the Ford Foundation offered to support and what the UNO community wanted to achieve.

Several features of the project’s programmatic design also proved to be effective. First, we began with a well-articulated theory of dialogue and made sure that all work associated with
the project was consistent with that theory. Our understanding is that one engages in dialogue in order to listen, learn, express one’s ideas, explore one’s values, and understand multiple points of view—not in order to win others over to a particular position. Because we were clear and explicit about this approach, nobody (except for one ill-informed writer at the Wall Street Journal) perceived us as pushing an agenda. In fact, our only agenda was the one we professed: to promote open, active inquiry into controversial issues in an environment of honesty and respect. We found it surprisingly easy to balance our focus on dialogue as a communicative process with a focus on race, religion, and sexual orientation as topics to be examined.

Second, having taken to heart the goal of changing the campus culture, we sought the kind of change that could be integrated into the work of the university. We presented dialogue not as an additional thing to do but as a different approach to what we already do as educators.

Third, we took advantage of the generative power of collaboration. As co-directors, we sought some division of labor, but for the most part we set the course of the program and made decisions jointly. More importantly, by selecting a core group of campus leaders at the outset and by creating the mini-grant program; in our second year, we established a large cohort of people who understood the project’s mission and were invested in its success. The group was strengthened enormously by the inclusion of both faculty and staff; people in both groups benefited from the opportunity to work together.

A time for reflection is also a time to ask what we might have done differently. Because the Difficult Dialogues Initiative funded projects for a two-year period, we did not establish a center or office to house the project. The project’s co-directors are faculty members, and its administrative home is the School of Communication, an academic unit whose purpose is to coordinate teaching and research in communication. In retrospect, we see that a project like this one, with a campus-wide and potentially a city-wide reach, would more appropriately be housed in a unit such as Multicultural Affairs, Student Affairs, or the Center for Faculty Development, where staff members could offer programmatic support as part of their daily work.

Over the course of the project, we lost two key people. Hollis Glaser, a co-director until May of 2006, moved to New York, and Sarah Moulton, our student worker in AY 06-07, accepted another job. In the first instance, we recovered well: Dr. Glaser was replaced by Dr. Cynthia Robinson-Moore, another faculty member from the School of Communication who brought new ideas and energy to the project as well as important connections to the African-American community. But when Ms. Moulton left, we made a mistake in not replacing her; it was difficult to manage the project without administrative assistance. (It may also have been a mistake for us to undertake such an ambitious project without workload adjustments, but the budget didn’t allow for re-assigned time for three faculty members.)

Finally, we wish we had hired a student worker to create a website. In the fall of 2006, we created a Blackboard organization site for the core group, and we added other faculty and staff who participated in Dialogue Circles. On the Blackboard site, we posted
announcements, materials from the Dialogue Workshop, and occasional discussion prompts for the Dialogue Circles. However, the Blackboard organization was not an adequate substitute for a website. It was accessible only by people on our campus whose names we added to the roster. A website would have extended our influence on campus, provided a convenient place for people to register for public dialogue events, and linked to campus units and community organizations with related missions, to the Public Dialogue Consortium and similar resources, and to the national Difficult Dialogues network.

In the video that accompanies this report, core group member Sharif Liwaru observes that the real test of the project’s impact lies ahead, as we see whether the campus continues to embrace dialogue after the close of the grant period. We are confident that the project’s impact will be felt for years to come. At UNO, the idea of difficult dialogue has taken root in our collective consciousness, in the way we think about conflict and communication. The Difficult Dialogues project has strengthened UNO’s capacity to fulfill its responsibilities as a public university – to provide a site for expressing, examining, and challenging ideas, and to educate students who can discuss public issues in informed and productive ways, speaking freely and listening with an open mind.

Diversity

N/A

Financial Report

Sent separately by UNO’s Office of Grants Accounting.
Attachment A: Dialogue Workshop and Refresher

List of Core Group Members

Sample Letter of Invitation to Core Group Members

Dialogue Workshop Agenda

Dialogue Workshop Resource Guide (Cover and TOC only)

Impact of Dialogue Workshop

Photograph of Core Group

Dialogue Refresher Agenda and Facilitators’ Outline
Breaking Silence:  
Difficult Dialogues at the University of Nebraska at Omaha

Project Directors
Nora Bacon
Shereen Bingham
Hollis Glaser (through May, 2006)
Cynthia Robinson-Moore (after May, 2006)

Core Group Members
Lori Arias               International Programs
Meredith Bacon         Political Science
Frank Bramlett         English
Mike Carroll           Goodrich
Maggie Christensen     English
Kate Clark             Disability Services
Ana Cruz              Communication
Carol Dillon           English
Karen Falconer Al-Hindi Women Studies
Carolyn Fiscus         Native American Studies
Jim Freeman            Multicultural Affairs
Farooka Gauharri       Biology
Rita Henry             Student Services
Peggy (Margaret) Jones  Black Studies
Teresa Lamsam          Communication
Kent Lavene            Student Affairs
Sharif Liwaru          Cultural Awareness Programs and Organizations
Carol Lloyd            Teacher Education
Bonnie O’Connell       Art
Patty Patton Shearer    Athletics
David Peterson         English
Kathy Pettid           Counseling/University Division
Joe Price              English
Shireen Rajaram        Sociology
Dori Richards          English
Barbara Robins         English
Thomas Sanchez         Sociology
Connie Sorensen-Birk   Project Achieve
Mary Sweaney           Human Resources
Peter Szto             Social Work
Barb Treadway-Janousek  Student Organization and Leadership Programs
Paul Williams          Religion

Graduate Assistant
Sarah Moulton          English
DIFFICULT DIALOGUES PROJECT
University of Nebraska at Omaha

February 15, 2006

Peggy Jones
Black Studies
ASH 184

Dear Peggy:

As you probably know, UNO has been awarded a Ford Foundation “Difficult Dialogues” grant to support constructive dialogue about race, religion, and sexuality issues on our campus. As co-directors of the project, we are writing to personally invite you to be part of this exciting project. We are extending this invitation to a select group of faculty and staff—people who teach key general education courses or whose work is particularly important to creating a diverse and inclusive campus. We hope you will want to join us in successfully implementing this program at UNO.

UNO’s Difficult Dialogues project was motivated by the observation that UNO students are often reluctant to engage in honest, substantive discussion of sensitive issues. In spite of the increasing diversity of the Omaha metropolitan area and a host of recent political conflicts centered on differences in race, religion, and sexual orientation, students often hesitate to share their perspective on these topics. Some students worry about revealing an embarrassing prejudice or disagreeing with their instructor; others (particularly minority students) have no confidence that their perspective will be understood. As faculty and staff, many of us feel ill-equipped to deal with the strong emotions, resistance, or defensiveness that highly-charged topics might evoke.

But active inquiry is at the heart of our mission. Today, when political discourse is growing ever more polarized, it is important for all of us to develop and strengthen our skills of engaging in and facilitating effective dialogue and to impart those skills to students.

UNO’s Difficult Dialogues project will begin this May with an extraordinary opportunity for staff and faculty to learn about dialogue theory and practice. Stephen Littlejohn, the co-author of Moral Conflict: When Social Worlds Collide (Sage, 1997) and Leslie Fagre of the Public Dialogue Consortium will offer a weeklong workshop for UNO faculty and staff. This interactive and exciting workshop, taught by leaders in the field, will give us the communication tools we need to facilitate more productive dialogue in the classroom and in our co-curricular activities. The workshop leaders will also guide us to think together about how we can apply what we learn in our pedagogy, and in August 2006 we will reunite for a half-day reunion to share our plans for incorporating dialogue into our
teaching. Throughout the 06-07 academic year, we will have opportunities to share what we have learned through Dialogue Circles and brown-bag meetings. Littlejohn will then return for a one-day refresher workshop in August 2007 to help us process our activities and plan for the future.

For your participation in the week-long workshop (May 15-19, 2006) and the follow-up meetings in August 06 and 07, you will be paid a stipend of $700. The workshops will be held at the Alumni House, where lunch and snacks will be provided.

Participation in this project is limited, so we are asking you to please respond to this invitation no later than February 27, 2006. After that date, we will send out a second set of invitations. Please respond via email to the project directors.

We hope you will be able to join us and that you are as excited about this opportunity as we are.

Sincerely,

Nora Bacon                Shereen Bingham                Hollis Glaser

Project Directors
Difficult Dialogues at the University of Nebraska at Omaha

UNO Alumni Center, Centennial Room, May 15-19, 2006

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

During the training week, the participants will accomplish the following outcomes:

1. Understand how people construct social realities in communication with others.
2. Understand the moral and values basis of difficult issues.
3. Identify typical patterns of communication used when encountering contentious, difficult issues and the limitations of these.
4. Appreciate dialogue as a form of communication that enables constructive exploration of difficult issues.
5. Know a variety of models for dialogue.
6. Be able to construct creative dialogue formats that adapt to various situations.
7. Be able to frame issues and ask questions in a way that make constructive communication possible.
8. Have skills for facilitating dialogue, especially in the classroom.
9. Gain tools for teaching dialogue to students.

WORKSHOP AGENDA

The workshop will begin each day at 8:30 a.m. and will conclude at 4:30 p.m. Monday–Thursday and at 12:00 p.m. on Friday. The schedule includes a continental breakfast each morning (8:30–9:00 a.m.) and breaks for lunch and a mid-afternoon snack. Participants are also invited to attend an optional dinner on Thursday evening. Following is an outline of each day’s activities:

Monday: Context Day
- Setting the stage: preparing for a week of dialogue
- Thinking differently about communication
- Communication and the management of difference

Tuesday: Design Day
- How to make hard issues discussable
- Content: framing issues
- Dialogue process

Wednesday: Facilitation Day
- Dialogue facilitation
- Managing conflict and difficult situations

Thursday: Teaching Day
- Teaching problems
- Teaching dialogue
- Dialogic teaching (facilitating dialogue in the classroom)
- Optional dinner (off campus)

Friday: Planning Day
- Process design
- Planning
DIFFICULT DIALOGUES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

RESOURCE GUIDE

DIALOGUE IN A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Area of Conflict
Moving from harm to value

Zone of irrelevance:
Difference does not seem to matter and goes largely unnoticed.

Zone of value:
Difference is relevant, but non-problematic, and even valuable.

Zone of harm:
Differences are damaging or destructive ways.

Zone of challenge:
Difference is relevant, but problematic, creating obstacles that require special management.

Provided by
Leslie Fagre
Stephen Littlejohn
and the Public Dialogue Consortium
May, 2006
© Public Dialogue Consortium
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Impact of Dialogue Workshop on Core Group of Campus Leaders

Percent of Agreement:
"I have knowledge of specific techniques and formats for facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom or in co-curricular activities."

Percent of Agreement:
"I have a clear knowledge of dialogue theory."

Percent of Agreement:
"I am motivated to make a positive difference in the campus community on issues of diversity."

Percent of Agreement:
"I am comfortable communicating with people who are different from me."
Percent of Agreement:
"I am confident that I can participate in constructive dialogue with people who strongly disagree with me."

Percent of Agreement:
"I am comfortable talking about race with someone whose views differ from mine."

Percent of Agreement:
"I am comfortable talking about religion with someone whose views differ from mine."

Percent of Agreement:
"I am comfortable talking about sexual orientation with someone whose views differ from mine."

Percent of Agreement:
"When talking with someone whose worldview is opposed to mine, I am curious to know how that person arrived at his/her perspective."

Percent of Agreement:
"In the classroom or in co-curricular activities, I am a skilled facilitator of dialogue on controversial and sensitive issues."