STRUCTURING STUDENT LEARNING TO LAST

Two articles in this issue describe how skill theory is used to build and rebuild a student's understanding. Marc S. Schwartz, Kurt W. Fischer, Patricia M. King, and JoNes R. VanHecke serve as guides through the process.

Also, Priya Narayan Parker on sustained dialogue, Donna M. Hauer shares a powerful life lesson, and more...
SUSTAINED DIALOGUE
HOW STUDENTS ARE CHANGING THEIR OWN RACIAL CLIMATE

Sustained Dialogue, used in the past to ease international tensions, is finding its way into colleges and universities that wish to change unhealthy race-based attitudes and behaviors. The campus approach brings small groups of students from widely different backgrounds together for a year of deep conversation.

WHEN I ARRIVED at college as a first-year student, I stepped into the most racialized climate I had ever experienced. At first, I was not sure how to navigate my way through this atmosphere. I had never been asked, “What are you?” so many times in my life. As a person from two cultural backgrounds (my mother is Indian and my father is white American), I had never really thought about what that made me. At first, I wasn’t exactly sure what to say or what the person was getting at, and then I learned I was supposed to answer, “Biracial; my mother is Indian and my father is white.” While being of Indian and European descent had always been a part of me, it had never been my only or even my primary identity. But at college, people expected it to be. What was worse, I found that students from different racial backgrounds do not interact with one another, and when they do, the interactions are awkward at best and hostile at the extreme.

I decided to do everything I could to understand race relations. I enrolled in courses on race (everything from History of the 20th Century South to Racial Politics, Race and Ethnicity, and Asian American Literature), attended forums and heard speakers on this issue, and read as much as I could. I learned the most and was most deeply influenced by the conversations I had with my peers. I realized that in most cases, when I was willing to talk about racial issues, so were those around me. But I also realized that most students had few, if any,
opportunities to discuss these sometimes difficult issues. Most conversations were happening behind closed doors, among students who already agreed with one another and among those who did not want to offend or isolate anyone else. When I complained to one of my friends who had been in college longer than me about the situation, she said to me, "Priya, stop complaining. UVA's 'student self-governance' is not just an empty saying; it's the way our community functions. If you see a problem, do something about it." In that moment, she reframed my own conception of what it means to be an active and engaged citizen in my community. I decided then that I would do something to improve race relations at the University of Virginia (UVA). I just was not exactly sure how to do it. In this article, I discuss the importance of student racial climate and one student-based approach—Sustained Dialogue—to improve this climate on college campuses in the United States.

Across American campuses, racial tension and other issues of diversity remain a major challenge. The majority of this country's institutions demonstrate that they value and promote diversity through efforts in affirmative action, minority student and faculty recruitment, and minority retention and through administration of special scholarships, diversity Web sites, diversity centers, and ethnic study programs. Most colleges and universities also identify diversity as a priority in their mission and core value statements. Despite continued institutional support for diversity issues, racial tensions remain very much in evidence. An article on the ABC News Web site entitled "Hate on Campus: Racial Threats at Penn State Highlight a Difficult Problem" cites a study conducted by Arthur Levine, president of Columbia University's Teachers College: "With all [the change in racial demographics], diversity has become the largest issue behind unrest on campus, accounting for thirty-nine percent of student protests." College is where students come into contact with racial and ethnic diversity, often for the first time and often in more intimate settings than they are used to—for example, in residential housing. Ironically, while greater tolerance is one goal of diversity, diversity itself often leads to racist backlash.

Racial tensions on college campuses manifest themselves in a variety of ways. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, college campuses are the third most common place for hate crimes to occur. Far more frequent, though less likely to draw national attention, are negative or racist newspaper articles, racially offensive parties, racist graffiti and vandalism, racial profiling, and self-segregation. For my senior thesis, entitled "Student Racial Climate: An Analysis and Assessment," I studied racial incidents and responses over five years on ten college campuses to assess the student racial climate at those institutions. For this study and for my subsequent work, I defined student racial climate as the mutually reinforcing relationship among the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of racial and ethnic groups and individuals and the actual patterns of interaction and behavior between and among groups and individuals. My study's findings indicated that no school is immune to racial problems. For example, in a scan of student newspapers over five years, I discovered that seven out of ten of the schools had had major incidents and protests involving members of minority communities and the student newspaper; all ten schools had dozens of opinion articles regarding self-segregation on campus and the affirmative action debate; half of the schools had had serious controversies over campus speakers invited to address race relations; and four of ten schools had public reports of racial assaults on students, racial profiling incidents, racial graffiti, and blackface or race-related theme parties.

Race relations among students continue to be unhealthy, despite widespread and public institutional support for diversity. A disconnect remains between the administrative and institutional values and the patterns of behavior and interaction among students. Important questions to ask include whether the institutional value of diversity actually penetrates into the student body, whether institutional values pertaining to diversity affect race relations in a positive and discernable way, and if they do not, how administrators can help change this

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relationship. While administrators can address these issues by taking several formal measures to support diversity, the student racial climate, a driving factor in setting the overall campus tone, too often is overlooked. An important priority for administrators should be focusing on what happens within the campus community, especially among students.

A negative racial climate severely impedes the fulfillment of an institution’s goal to promote diversity. A negative student racial climate can affect students’ experiences and academic performance. In a Web site summary of her article “The Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict,” Sylvia Hurtado notes, “Research has documented well how different racial/ethnic groups can experience difficulties as a result of a poor racial climate.” She emphasizes the importance of a positive racial climate: “The research shows that increasing the racial/ethnic diversity on a campus while neglecting to attend to the racial climate can result in difficulties for students of color as well as white students.” Hurtado also notes that “individuals’ and particular groups’ perceptions of the environment are not inconsequential or intangible, but have tangible and real effects on the transition to college and on educational outcomes.” Improving student racial climate begins with administrators acknowledging that institutional climate does not necessarily match student climate. In The Invisible Tapestry: Culture in American Colleges and Universities, George D. Kuh and Elizabeth J. Whitt elaborate: “The dominant student [climate] may reflect or refute the central ideals of the institution as a whole. Thus, it is another powerful influence on an institution’s [overall] climate” (p. 85). The powerful influence of student culture is seen on campuses where racial incidents belie the stated values of the institution.

A negative student racial climate can cause students, particularly ethnic minorities, to spend more time and energy on worrying and feeling unwelcome than on studying and learning. Besides distracting students from their studies, an unhealthy student racial climate can contribute to student attrition. Negative student racial climate can also prevent students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds from approaching one another due to intimidation, difficulty, fear, or unease. This prevents interaction among students from differing backgrounds, which is acknowledged as a key benefit of a diverse learning environment. In addition, although interests typically determine the types of organizations that students join, student racial climate can play a role in determining which students participate in clubs or other campus groups. Improved student racial climate can occur only through the initiative and direct participation of students. While administrators can change structural and institutional policies and practices that affect the climate for diversity, students are the only ones who can change the way they perceive, interact with, and treat one another.

**Sustained Dialogue**

The summer after my first college year, as I began researching various approaches to improving race relations, I discovered the process of Sustained Dialogue (SD) developed by Harold Saunders, who had years of experience in transforming conflict relationships and rebuilding communities after civil wars across the globe, and recorded in A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts. Students at Princeton University had recently adapted the process to their campus, and two students, Teddy Nemeroff and David Tukey, had written a manual, Diving In, to help other college students replicate what they had done and seen work so well. This passage from the manual particularly resonated with me:

While a university’s administration can say a great deal about the importance of improving race relations on its campus, the administrative body is likely to have neither the time nor the resources to address this problem effectively. Just as the primary purpose for the national government is to provide law and order for its citizens, a university administration’s primary goal is to provide the best possible education for its students. Of course, in this process of providing an education to its students, it is necessary for a university administration to create a wholesome climate in which learning can occur. However, it is impossible for the administrators of a university to create any regulation that will change the interpersonal relationships among the students on its campus. Relationships are governed more by emotions than reason and, as a result, are not easily influenced by regulation. Relationships are established and evolve by personal contact. In the case of a university, the administration does not have the human resources to execute the necessary personal contact. By default, the task of changing contentious campus relationships lies in the hands of the students. [pp. 1-2]

Nemeroff and Tukey had presented me with exactly what I needed: a point of entry into addressing
student racial climate. They explain, "One purpose of Sustained Dialogue is to give you a place to dive in. Sustained Dialogue separates itself from other projects that seek to ameliorate ethnic and racial conflict in a very simple regard: it is sustained. The process engrosses all who become involved and carries them toward possible methods for combating the issue of racial tension on campus. As the process progresses, one realizes that it can be self-proliferating. As such, simply getting the process started is taking one giant step in the right direction toward improving race relations" (p. 2).

The fundamental philosophy of Sustained Dialogue is that affecting community problems means changing the underlying relationships. This philosophy reflected my own experience. Sustained Dialogue creator Harold Saunders explains in his book Politics Is About Relationships: A Blueprint for the Citizen's Century, "Although there are some things that only governments can do—like negotiate peace agreements—there are some things that only citizens outside government can do—such as transform human relationships, change political cultures, and modify human behavior" (p. 1). Saunders continues: "The capacities and energies of these citizens are the world's greatest untapped resource in meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century" (p. 1). Through Sustained Dialogue, Saunders has provided an approach for community members to engage in social change.

**WHAT IS SUSTAINED DIALOGUE?**

SUSTAINED DIALOGUE is a carefully defined but open-ended process that focuses on changing relationships within a community that are strained along ethnic, racial, religious, or other lines. These relationships are typically strained by deep-rooted differences over identity, interest, power, misconceptions, or destructive habits of interacting. Instead of discussing surface issues, Sustained Dialogue probes deep into the background and experiences of the individuals in the group, allowing them to understand one another's behaviors and perspectives. The Sustained Dialogue framework reflects a naturally evolving process of relationship building that Saunders observed during his years moderating divided groups of Americans and Soviets during the Cold War and in the former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan after its independence. He organized this natural progression of developing relationships into five stages: (1) coming together and deciding to engage in dialogue, (2) downloading and mapping and naming problems and relationships, (3) setting a direction for change, (4) scenario building, and (5) acting together. The process is intended to transform individuals, groups, and entire communities.

In contrast to one-time events such as panel discussions or forums, Sustained Dialogue is an ongoing process. Each meeting builds on the previous one, allowing the group to develop a cumulative agenda, with questions sharpened and carried from one meeting to the next; to build a common body of knowledge that participants can test between meetings; and to learn to talk and work analytically together. Repeated gatherings of ten to twelve individuals allows time to build relationships, better understand one another, realize growth, and develop a network of allies who are committed to community change.

Saunders notes that relationships unfold over time in a series of stages. One-time events, therefore, cannot facilitate the evolution of relationships over time. Relationships, according to Saunders, comprise five key components. The first, identity, Saunders characterizes as having both mental and physical characteristics and including the life experience that brings each participant to the present moment. Second, interests, both substantive and psychological, are what people care about and what brings them to the same space and gives them a sense of interdependence in achieving goals. The third component of relationships is power, which Saunders defines as the capacity of citizens to act together to influence the course of events without great material resources and without control over superior resources and the actions of others. The fourth component, perceptions, misperceptions, and stereotypes, is the way individuals and groups perceive one another, regardless of the accuracy of the perceptions. The fifth component, patterns of interaction among those involved in the relationship, governs both the historical and current approach that groups take toward social interaction.

Sustained Dialogue is a simple concept. One SD student at the University of Virginia explains, "[SD] brings together groups of people that would not usually be found in the same room, and it gives them the opportunity to discuss topics usually kept behind closed doors. But discussion is what is needed if people are ever..."
going to open up and change their ways, and that is what Sustained Dialogue is all about.” Sustained Dialogue is a voluntary process and recruits students from different communities, backgrounds, and perspectives. Another SD student describes his experience: “Sustained Dialogue makes college more enjoyable. We all go to school seeking new experiences and people but often don’t like to step outside our comfort zones. Sustained Dialogue . . . puts ten or so people of various backgrounds in a room and, through simple communication, creates great friendships. Cultures, religions, and entire lives are shared merely through human interaction.”

Sustained Dialogue offers a safe environment for students to come together to explore relationship dynamics. SD groups commit to meeting for two hours every two weeks over an entire academic year. Group members determine their own agenda, and each meeting builds on the previous one, with a single purpose: to improve strained relationships. Though the agenda of each group is particular to the make-up and interests of that group, common themes often include discussion of self-segregation, inter-racial dating, racial humor, whiteness and white privilege, immigration, and the meaning of being American. The conversation differs from a classroom discussion in that students describe their personal experiences as they relate to all of these issues, in addition to reading relevant articles and drawing from outside information. One Princeton student notes, “As a black woman in America I confront many barriers. Sustained Dialogue is my voice. It is an avenue for me to be honest about my experience and share my perspective. When my contemporaries acquire positions of power, they might remember our discussions, [which might] possibly shape the way they see the world.”

Another SD student explains, “Sustained Dialogue has opened my eyes up to race relations in a way that I had never thought possible. As a middle-class white student from the suburbs, I had been taught the color-blind mentality [while I was] growing up and, as a result, was unaware of the racial dynamics that pervade all segments of society. Going through Sustained Dialogue, I’ve learned more from my peers—and taught others more—than I ever could have imagined.”

**Campus Dialogue Programs**

As I BECAME increasingly immersed in Sustained Dialogue, I discovered similar efforts on other campuses, including intergroup dialogues at the University of Michigan and several other schools and Conversations on Race at Indiana University.

The University of Michigan created the Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict, and Community in 1988 to help ease racial and ethnic tensions. Sylvia Hurtado, in a Web summary of her article “Enacting Diverse Learning Environments,” notes, “The program’s goals were to advance students’ understanding of deeply rooted inter-group conflicts and to increase their skills in addressing issues related to conflict and community.” Along with other programs, the center offers intergroup dialogues that “provide a structure within the academy for students from different backgrounds and cultural identities to discuss commonalities, learn about differences, and address issues of conflict.” Students are trained to facilitate the groups because “the goal is to harness the learning that occurs primarily through peers by training peers to facilitate the dialogues.” Most of the dialogues offer academic credit to student participants. According to the program’s director, between sixty and two hundred students participate each semester. Intergroup dialogue programs exist on other campuses, including Arizona State University, the University of Maryland, University of Illinois, the University of Oregon, and the University of Washington.

In response to a hate crime during the summer of 1999 in which a student shot and killed an international student, the Indiana University community launched its own dialogue program, Conversations on Race. Its Web site explains, “The Conversations on Race program is a five-week program held each semester that brings together diverse members of the university community for the purpose of improving the community’s racial climate.”

A central tenet of all of these programs is that in order to realize sustained change in actions and attitudes, students must interact face to face with one another over an extended period of time. Face-to-face dialogue

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has been demonstrated to be central to improving interactions and understanding among those who do not share the same background and ethnicity. In her widely quoted study “Diversity Works,” Daryl Smith concludes on her Web site, “Opportunities for interaction between and among student groups are desired by virtually all students and produce clear increases in understanding and decreases in prejudicial attitudes. Such opportunities also positively affect academic success. The conditions under which interactions among individuals are likely to be beneficial include institutional support, equal status, and common goals.”

OUTCOMES OF SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, each of the five university and one high school student-run Sustained Dialogue programs has seen a dramatic annual rate of growth in the number of dialogue groups. At the University of Virginia, nineteen dialogue groups met over the course of the past year. Five additional institutions are in the process of implementing a Sustained Dialogue program, and nearly a dozen more have expressed interest. At the schools with Sustained Dialogue, the number of total participants and dialogue groups doubles annually. In 2001, Sustained Dialogue at Princeton won the Daily Princetonian’s prize for contributing the most to student life. In 2003 and 2004, UVA Sustained Dialogue was recognized by the student council as the Most Outstanding Large Contracted Independent Organization. In 2004, UVA Sustained Dialogue won the James Earl Sergeant Award, and the student newspaper recognized Sustained Dialogue as the group that contributed the most to the university.

INITIATING SUSTAINED DIALOGUE ON MORE CAMPUSES

AFTER SUSTAINED DIALOGUE was functioning on three campuses—Princeton University, the University of Virginia, and Dickinson College—Harold Saunders recognized a need to provide more systematic support to students who wished to initiate Sustained Dialogue on other campuses. He recruited students who had been closely involved in launching the campus programs to serve as catalysts and resources for other students. The Sustained Dialogue Campus Network (SDCN) was created by Saunders and students who had initiated Sustained Dialogue. From observations of the process that students have used to initiate and organize Sustained Dialogue programs, the SDCN has developed training and capacity-building methods for helping other students launch and sustain SD programs.

The Sustained Dialogue process begins when students identify a problem in their community that they wish to address. At this point, the SDCN conducts Initiator’s Training to guide students in thinking about campus dynamics. This process includes mapping the campus community, subcommunities, and individuals affected by the identified problem as well as facilitating conversations to help participants better understand the roots of the problem. Critical questions addressed by the students involved in the training process include the following: Who is affected by this issue? How would we characterize the student racial climate on this campus? Is there a large discrepancy in perspectives on this issue? If we were to create a space in which people from different communities could come together to explore the dynamics of this issue, who would we want to be in the room? The campus SD initiating team then begins to identify concerned communities and individuals and develops a strategy to engage them in dialogue. The team also selects student moderators to lead the groups who will participate in Moderator Training facilitated by the SDCN.

Students garner administrative support and consider methods for sustaining the dialogue on their campus. Because the SDCN operates from the premise that relationships and communities change over time, it helps build a process through which dialogue involving an ever-increasing number of students can be sustained through an entire year. Experience suggests that key success factors include creation of a student-run, administration-supported program, involvement of a diverse mix of student leaders, encouraged participation among all students, and opportunities for face-to-face interaction.
Through Sustained Dialogue, students take responsibility for shaping and reshaping their own perceptions of campus climate and shaping the campus climate itself. Sustained Dialogue is a starting point, offering students a tangible process for addressing potentially divisive issues, including race. One student founder of Sustained Dialogue recalls, "I agonized with friends through my freshman year about how I could do something to improve race relations. When I heard about Sustained Dialogue, I said to myself, "That's something I can do." Sustained Dialogue is, most important, a student-driven initiative. Through Sustained Dialogue, students are beginning to play a role in improving race relations on campuses. One of the founders of SD at the University of Notre Dame notes, "Before I found out about Sustained Dialogue, I was like many other students at Notre Dame: I was apathetic towards the state of race relations on our campus. We all viewed our racial tension as the way things were instead of [imagining] how they should be."

Most students enter college with an open mind and a willingness to attend programs that their new community regards as important. Students who pursue a higher education come together for several years, during which time there is little to prevent colleges and universities from creating opportunities for these students to model democratic dialogue. Because individuals make the climate, they can also change it, and the SDCN experience suggests that many students are interested in effecting such change. George Kuh's research indicates that "it is during the college years that students may exhibit greater openness to change in social and political attitudes" (p. 28). Members of the SDCN believe that improving student racial climate on college campuses is not only an opportunity, it is an imperative.

\section*{Notes}


