

Bagels, Sushi, Fufu, and Flan: The Diversity Project and Recipes for Change

Lloyd Sheldon Johnson

The student population at Bunker Hill Community College is a rich mosaic of diversity. We are multicolored, multicultural, multilingual, and multifaceted. Forty percent of our student population represents over sixty countries. This is truly an institution that should be raised as a model for what community colleges throughout America will look like in most urban arenas within the next decade. Along with the complexities and challenges of teaching to a population that is dynamic and ever-evolving, we must push forward, despite intolerance and indifference.

BHCC has moved forward with some powerful initiatives that will enhance the curriculum, integrate new technologies into all modes of learning, and provide support services that will empower students to be more successful. These initiatives have created a new vision and commitment for the institution that will accelerate the achievement of its goals and plans. As one of these, the diversity initiative is a part of the college's critical agenda.

Our country is changing, and it is changing rapidly. The demographics are enlightening and, in some cases, rather alarming. Washington, D.C. boasts some fifty Ethiopian and Eritrean restaurants. San Diego has surpassed the Detroit area as the hub for Arab Americans. Houston has attracted a large Nigerian population. The Miami area is home to "Little Cuba." Italian is the primary language spoken in the neighborhoods of Boston's North End. Watertown, a suburb of Boston, still has the largest Armenian population in America. Many Haitians have made their homes in either Florida or the Boston area. New York has one of the largest Caribbean festivals in North America, and California is home to many of the diverse populations of Asia and the Pacific islands.

Our country is in the midst of a most powerful change. As we adjust to these times and open our arms to embrace the diversity that truly symbolizes America, we must prepare ourselves for the changes that lie ahead. It is important that we learn how to acknowledge and accept difference. The term "tolerance" was bandied about for many years in most of the early literature that addressed issues of racism and discrimination. More recently, it has been frowned upon because it suggests that someone must be "put up with" or swallowed like the bitter taste of some awful medicine. The current vernacular seeks to be more inclusive as it addresses diversity. We must be mindful of the fact that difference does not imply "more than" or "less than." We must also acknowledge that true diversity allows for the inclusion of varying opinions, different lifestyles, different modes of dress and appearance, and many other modes of expression that may not comply with some imposed standard or norm.

The Diversity Project at Bunker Hill Community College¹ is a work in progress which has evolved as a result of the current president's commitment to a college-wide strategic

planning initiative that began by prioritizing the concerns of the institution. Initially, a series of workshops and planning sessions were held to receive input from all the members of our community. One of the resulting priorities pointed clearly to the need for programs and projects that would foster open and honest communication. Though we had the usual channels of communication available at most college campuses, it was felt that more were needed. Members of our college community now have the opportunity to provide input at the Board of Trustees' meetings, the president's open forums, college committee meetings, as well as at the monthly college forum. As these channels increased in number and availability, people started speaking up.

The Diversity Task Force², comprised of representatives from the administration, faculty, and staff, held some brainstorming sessions and decided to take a critical look at the climate of the college relative to diversity. The group designed an assessment instrument and set out to survey the college community to identify areas of strength and weakness, keeping in mind that its findings would be most valuable in designing projects that address the diversity initiative. All of the findings of this climate survey have been documented and distributed to the college community.

There were a few areas that drew interest and pointed to the need for more study. For example, discrimination based on race and job status was an important finding. Many employees of the college felt they were not included in the social and intellectual culture of the college because of their job status. All of the African Americans surveyed felt they had been discriminated against within the past year. Gender, sexual orientation, age and religion were eliminated as sources of discrimination. An ambitious endeavor, the climate survey gave rise to the need for critical assessments in other key areas. Surveys such as these provide us with a window through which we can honestly view our institution and work together to improve the climate we all share. The next step will be to design instruments to poll our students on the same key issues that we addressed when looking at the administration, faculty and staff of the college.

Bunker Hill Community College has inherited a legacy that began some twenty-five years ago when armed policemen were stationed on site to escort students of color into the building because many "local" residents did not want "them" to attend "their" college. This was, of course, during the time when the busing issue was an ongoing political and social fireball that rocked the halls of justice and kept people and neighborhoods divided. During those times, rumors spread like fire on seasoned wood, and most people wore the armor of fear and rage. The fires have died down; there is no longer a need for a police presence on campus, and Bunker Hill Community College has opened its doors to all.

The Diversity Project seeks to bring a new energy to the discussion on diversity and inclusion by providing "learning adventures" that guide the participant toward a powerful and inescapable self-awareness. Once the experiential component has been completed, participants are generally eager to share their new learning.

The program uses experiential learning encounters to totally engage participants as they move from the stage of commitment to civility to the expectation of diversity and inclusion. Each encounter promotes risk, self-awareness and change.

Participants in any awareness encounter bring with them the beliefs, attitudes and values that they have developed and nurtured over the years. The opinions that have guided them and provided them with comfort and shelter for years will not necessarily be challenged in a single encounter. That is why it is important to give participants multiple opportunities to share their views and to listen to those of others.

Each adventure has as its foundation an activity with an objective, a process, and an outcome. Inherent in the model is a strong leadership component designed to groom each participant as a leader, thus ensuring that the program will perpetuate itself. This process can be started at any time, suspended for brief periods, and tailored to fit the needs of any institution or organization.

The training component is outlined below along with two sample “adventures” that can be used to sensitize an audience to the issues of race and to the challenges of those with sensory and physical challenges.

The Training Component

The activities which make up the training component were designed to inspire dialogue and discussion around key social issues that impact the diversity of our college community. They explore culture, gender, age, skin color, physical appearance and other external features that often force people to isolate themselves or their groups. One of the primary goals of this project is to get people to open up to each other so that the myths and stereotypes that shape many behaviors can be discussed in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. From these discussions, many other discussions will develop, and out of these will likely come the development of programs and activities that bring more harmony to our college community.

Ground Rules

Before beginning the activities, it is important to have each participant agree to the ground rules. These rules help to frame the discussions by setting limits and parameters. Participants must agree to:

- respect the opinions of others,
- speak only for themselves and not for anyone else in the group,
- address the group when speaking and not target individuals within the group,
- speak openly and honestly, their egos at the door and not carry issues outside of the group once the adventures and discussions are completed.

It is advisable to distribute the ground rules to each participant and to write them on a board or newsprint where they can be visible throughout the meeting.

Discussion

The person who has convened the group should lead the discussion after completing each activity. It is important to note that one activity can take an hour or longer if the discussions are allowed to flow. It is helpful to limit the time each person speaks so that anyone who wishes to participate has an opportunity to do so. The idea is to allow the process to flow. It may sometimes be necessary for the leader to remind participants of the ground rules so that the process is not impeded by those who wish to dominate. The leader should keep in mind that he or she is dealing with a captive audience. People volunteer to participate and they agree to the ground rules. By doing this, they tacitly commit to being open to change. This is a powerful beginning to a seamless process that can evolve into empowering individuals in the college and the college as a whole. If all participants feel that their voices will be heard, they will speak out.

Closure

It is advisable to attempt only one activity per meeting. To engage any more than this will put participants on overload and dilute the power of the discussions. At the end of the session, which should last at least an hour but not more than three, the session should reach closure. The leader should provide a summation and acknowledge the group for its commitment. One of the most powerful closure activities that brings cohesion to any group involves creating a human circle with participants standing and expressing, in a minute or less, what they got out of the activity. It allows participants to engage in their own personal closure while giving a part of what they feel to the group. The leader should thank everyone, discuss times for the next meeting, and invite written suggestions for activities or policies for the institution.

A Model for Change

The Diversity Project has provided our college community with an opportunity to openly and safely talk about our perceptions, our differences, and our realities. We have used our new learning to inspire colleagues, friends and family members. We have free and open discussions and feel we have the support of the college as we move forward with this initiative. There is now a dean of diversity and inclusion, whose position was created through the president's office and is structured as a critical component of the college's executive team. All of these efforts have contributed toward making this institution a model for social change and a powerful example of the joy that can be experienced once individuals and organizations make a commitment not only to acknowledge difference, but also to accept and applaud it.

Recipes for Change: Sample Activities from The Diversity Project

Adventure One: White, Black, Yellow, Brown

Objective: to open dialogue and create a safe environment for honest communication to take place.

Process

Participants will need paper and pens. No names need to be added to the sheets that will be passed in and shared for discussion. Each participant receives a sheet with either

“white,” “brown,” “black” or “yellow” written at the top. They are then to write, until exhausted, about how that group is treated in America. The assignment is loose enough to allow for many perceptions and variations.

Outcome

Participants will feel uncomfortable. A strong leader must guide the discussion and direct it toward the goal of understanding others.

Adventure Two: Without Senses — I feel; therefore, I am.

Objective: to help participants become sensitive to those with physical and sensory challenges.

Process

Each group is limited to six participants. Wheelchairs, ear plugs, blindfolds, crutches, and masking tape or duct tape are provided to create “challenges” for the participants. Group problems are assigned and everyone must participate to find solutions. A math story problem is given, as well as a task that involves the entire group going together to some other part of the building to retrieve something. Finally, there is a problem that involves reading and interpreting a short story.

Outcome

Responses will be varied since some participants are blindfolded, others are wearing earplugs, and others are in wheelchairs. Participants will be able to discuss the difficulties of constantly adjusting to the environment around them.

Endnotes

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² The Diversity Task Force, supported and encouraged by Dr. Mary Fifield, President of Bunker Hill Community College, was comprised of Debbie Blouin, Eileen Berger, Charles Chisholm, Tusi Gastonguay, Lloyd Sheldon Johnson, Juanita Lightfoot, Lorraine Murphy, Rekha Palriwala, John Reeves, Karl Smith, and Yvette Straughter.