BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM

THE ABC APPROACH
TO CREATING CLIMATES OF ENGAGEMENT ON DIVERSE CAMPUSES

DISCOURSE

The Benefits of Engagement

Increasingly, faculty, students and administrators alike are recognizing the importance of engagement across difference as an essential dimension of preparing the next generation for effective participation in a pluralistic world (AAC&U 1995). This assessment of the importance of diversity is supported by a growing body of empirical research demonstrating the educational benefits of learning in a diverse community (Hurtado 1999). For example, social psychologist Pat Gurin (1999) has found that students who experienced the most racial and ethnic diversity in and out of their classrooms showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills. Moreover, they showed the most engagement during college in various forms of citizenship, the most engagement with people from different races and cultures, and were the most likely to acknowledge that group differences are compatible with the interests of the broader community. These results persisted beyond graduation. Students with the most diversity experiences during college had the most cross-racial friends, neighbors, and work associates nine years after college entry.

As we consider creating climates of engagement, we must be intentional in structuring opportunities to cross the long-standing boundaries that separate us in American society

The last finding is a particularly powerful one in light of the self-perpetuating power of segregation in U.S. society. Gurin concludes, "If institutions of higher education are able to bring together students from various ethnic and racial backgrounds at the critical time of late adolescence and early adulthood, they have the opportunity to disrupt an insidious cycle of lifetime segregation that threatens the fabric of our pluralistic democracy" (116).

The benefits of engaging diversity are compelling, but are enough students taking advantage of these formal and informal learning opportunities? The popular perception is that they are not. Newspapers and magazines regularly feature stories about the dilemma of so-called "self-segregation" on college campuses. The question, "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" is frequently asked in this context (Tatum 1997). Despite this perception, there is some evidence that there is more student desire for cross-group interaction than a quick glance in the cafeteria may indicate.

In a recent study of friendship groups within a diverse campus community, Anthony Lising Antonio (1999) found that while over 90 percent of the 638 third-year students he surveyed reported that students predominantly cluster by race and ethnicity, almost half (46 percent) described their own friendship groups as racially and ethnically mixed with no racial or ethnic group predominating. Clearly these students did not view their own behavior as the norm.

In a study of Berkeley undergraduates, Troy Duster (1993) and his associates found that most students express interest in more interracial experiences, yet how that interest is expressed varies along racial lines. White stu-

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dents who wanted to make friends with African Americans wanted to do so in informal settings and were less likely to want to participate in special programs, courses, or activities that structure interethnic contacts. Conversely, African Americans were far more likely to want special programs and activities and were less interested in developing cross-racial friendships and social activities. Duster concludes, "The task is to provide all students with a range of safe environments and options where they can explore and develop on terms that they find comfortable. In the absence of such opportunities, the tendencies remain for each group to see the others from a distance, in terms of images, stereotypes, stories, and myths that are not informed by direct contact and experience" (241).

How then can we create campus environments where engagement across lines of difference is perceived as a norm, rather than as an exception? How can we maximize the learning opportunities created by the diversity of our communities? Drawing on an understanding of identity development during the college years and the insights provided by the research on diversity in higher education, let's consider a three-pronged approach, which I have referred to elsewhere (Tatum1998) as the ABCs: affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership. This approach has implications for curricular as well as co-curricular initiatives on campus, and both will be considered in this discussion.

Affirming identity

All undergraduate students, regardless of age, are engaged in an important process of exploration, asking the questions, Who am I? What will I be? With whom will I be associated? The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers? My neighbors? The store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? *Or am I missing from the picture altogether?*

In order to create a climate of engagement, we must begin by asking what images are reflected in the mirror of our institutions. Does the reflection affirm the identities of all our students? Every student should be able to see important parts of herself reflected in some way. All should be able to find themselves in the faces of other students and among the faculty and staff, as well as reflected in the curriculum.

In addition to the important work of curricular inclusion, a common approach to affirming marginalized identities institutionally is through the establishment of cultural centers. At Mount Holyoke College, there are five such spaces, serving the needs of the African-American/Afro-Caribbean, Latina, Native-American, Asian and Asian-American, and lesbian/bisexual/transgendered student populations. Some observers argue that while the existence of such curricular and co-curricular spaces affirms identity, they work against building community, encouraging separation rather than the cross-group engagement we seek. As paradoxical as it may seem, the opposite is more often the case. As Daryl Smith and her associates (1997) report, one persistent research finding is that student involvement with campus groups reflecting personal, cultural, or service interests helps students feel that they belong on campus, that they are contributing to the campus culture, and that their interests are reflected in the institution. Students who feel affirmed in this way are more likely to be willing to reach out beyond their own identity groups to engage with others.

Building community

Even as we strive to reflect the diversity of our campuses, we need to inculcate a sense of shared purpose as members of a particular educational community. This task of creating unity from diversity mirrors the ongoing challenge of American society, and our efforts to successfully build community in a diverse context provide excellent modeling for our students, who will need these skills in the pluralistic communities they will enter after graduation.

As has been noted, affirming identity is not contradictory to, but rather a prerequisite for building community. When institutions work to affirm historically underrepresented groups, however, it is sometimes students from dominant groups (i.e., whites, males, Christians, heterosexuals) that begin to feel left out. As institutions become more responsive to di-

verse constituents, students from dominant groups may need help seeing that there is still a place for them in a pluralistic community.

How can we maximize the learning opportunities created by the diversity of our communities?

We recently confronted this dilemma as part of our orientation programming for first year students at Mount Holyoke. We used a poetry-writing activity described by Linda Christensen (1998), which can be done quite spontaneously. Using the stem, "I am from" for each stanza, we asked students to describe familiar items found around their home, sights and sounds from their neighborhood, names of foods and dishes that recall family gatherings, familiar family sayings, names of relatives, especially those that link them to the past. In doing so, we helped them make their own cultures visible not only to themselves but also to others. Here are some sample stanzas:

> I am from books, books, and more books,
> long afternoons spent at the library,
> traveling way beyond the limits of my small town.
>
> I am from stone walls, and dairy farms,
> brilliant autumn leaves and church school hayrides,
> the sound of my brother's saxophone at 5 a.m.,
> and the cheers of the Saturday afternoon football crowd across the street.
>
> I am from tofu balls and biscuits, grits and eggs
> pancakes every Saturday,
> coconut cake on my birthday,
> and pizza, pizza and more pizza if J.T. has his way.
>
> I am from "Treat people the way you want to be treated,"
> "If you don't have something nice to say,
> don't say anything at all,"
> and "We are pleased but not surprised,"
> when I share good news.
> I am from "Eat your vegetables" but *not* the lima beans!
>
> I am from Hazel and Maxwell, Bob and Catherine,
> Victor Hugo and Constance Eleanor,
> a long line of educators,
> I am from proud men and women working for change.

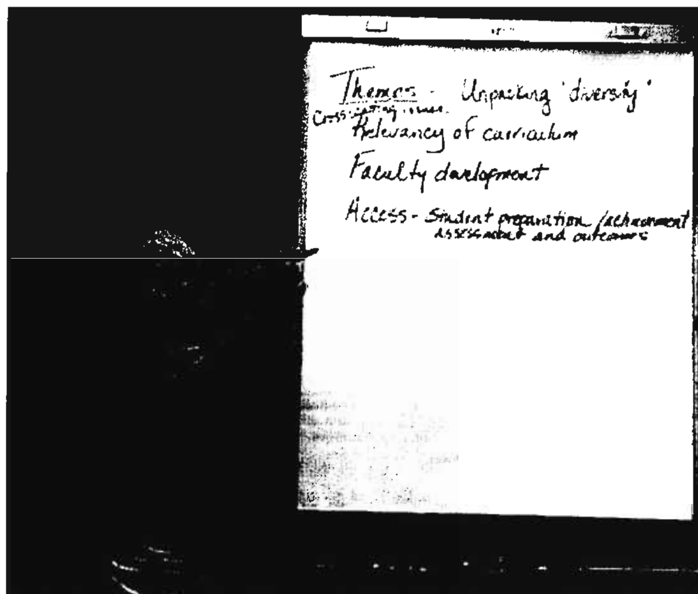
After discussing their poems in small groups, students were given the opportunity to read their poems to an auditorium full of other first year students. Many were eager to share a glimpse of their cultural heritage with their classmates. Students quickly began to make connections to each other's experiences. Their evaluations of this orientation activity were positive, and included such telling comments as "Even white suburbia has culture," "Although we have a lot of differences, we also have many things in common. This is an amazing group of people!" Educational experiences such as this one not only affirm individual and group identities, but also build community; and that is the goal—to find ways to do both.

Community building can also be emphasized in the curriculum. Easily implemented pedagogical strategies such as assigning students to diverse discussion groups (rather than letting them choose groups themselves) help students make connections with one another across lines of difference. Allport's (1958) four conditions for positive intergroup contact (equal status, common goal, interdependence, and support from authorities for the contact) can often be created in the classroom. Indeed, cooperative learning, service learning, and collaborative learning communities have been shown to facilitate the development of intellectual complexity as well as multicultural competencies (Smith 1997).

Other dimensions of community building in a classroom are more difficult to achieve. Particularly when discussing issues related to social justice (i.e., racism and classism), passions run high, and polarization, rather than connection, can result. However, engaging students in ongoing discussions of racism may be the most powerful tool for community building available to us. In his assessment of the impact of diversity and multiculturalism on students, Astin (1993) reported that "the largest number of positive effects was associated with the frequency with which students discussed racial/ethnic issues during their undergraduate years" (47). This is an intriguing finding, given the tensions that are often associated with race-related discussions in racially mixed settings. The American Commitments National Panel noted that "of all the sources of unequal power in the United States, race is the razor that most brutally cuts and divides" (24). In order to avoid being "cut," many students, white and of color, retreat into silence.

Yet, building community requires dialogue.

Racism, like the other "isms" of sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ableism, is a powerful source of disconnection in our society. It alienates us not only from others but also from ourselves and our own experiences. As Jean Baker Miller (1988) describes it, when we have meaningful experiences, we usually seek validation from the other. When we do not feel heard, a relational disconnection takes place, and we feel invalidated. We might try again to be heard, or we may choose to disconnect from that person. If there are others available who will listen and affirm us, we may turn to them. But if disconnection means what Miller calls "condemned isolation," then we will do whatever we have to in order to remain in connection with others. That may mean denying our own experiences of racism, selectively screening things out of our conscious awareness so that we can continue our relationships with reduced discomfort. That may be an important coping strategy in some contexts, but it may also lead to the self-blame and self-doubt of internalized oppression.



Beverly Tatum at Tri-National Seminar

The consequences of silence are different, but also damaging for white people. Many whites have been encouraged by a culture of silence about racism to disconnect from their racial experiences. When white children make racial observations, for example, they are often silenced by their parents, who feel uncomfortable and unsure of how to respond. As children get older, the observed contradictions—between parental attitudes and behaviors or between societal messages about meritocracy and visible inequities—become difficult to process in a culture of silence. In order to prevent chronic discomfort, individuals may learn to "not notice."

But, in not noticing, one loses opportunities for greater insight into oneself and one's own experience. Privilege goes unnoticed, and all but the most blatant acts of racial bigotry are ignored. Not noticing requires energy. Exactly how much energy is used up in this way becomes apparent when the opportunity to explore those silenced perceptions is made available. It is as though a blockage has been removed, and energy is released.

According to Jean Baker Miller, when a relationship is growth-producing, it results in five good things: increased zest, a sense of empowerment, greater knowledge, an increased sense of self-worth, and a desire for more connection. It is exactly these kinds of characteristics that have been reported by researchers like Astin, Hurtado, Gurin, and Smith, who have all investigated the benefits of diverse interactions on campus. In my own research (Tatum and Knaplund 1996) involving interviews with white teachers who were actively engaged in leading discussions with others about racism, there was abundant evidence of these benefits.

Said one teacher, "The thing that's happened for me is that I'm no longer afraid to bring [race] up. I look to bring it up; I love bringing it up." This teacher now brings up these issues regularly with her colleagues, and they, like her, seem to feel liberated by the opportunity for dialogue. Describing a discussion group in which participants talked about racial issues, she said: "It was such a rich conversation, and it just flowed the whole time. It was exciting to be a part of it, and everybody contributed, and everybody had their say. And everybody felt the energy and the desire."

Numerous writers have addressed strategies for encouraging dialogic interaction in the classroom in the context of talking about race: e.g., Tatum 1992; Schoem, Frankel, Zu-

niga, and Lewis 1993; Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997. Common strategies include establishing clear guidelines for discussion (i.e., honoring confidentiality, maintaining mutual respect, "no zaps") and the use of dyads and small group discussions in combination with other teaching methods.

The multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious America of the late twentieth century is "truly a new frontier"

Specifically, when teaching about racism, I have found it useful to alert students to the emotional responses—guilt, shame, embarrassment, or anger—that many people have when talking and learning about racism. Such responses are predictable, but students often think that they alone are struggling with these powerful emotions. Talking explicitly about the fact that these feelings may be part of the learning process helps to normalize the experience and helps students remain engaged with the course content and each other when these strong emotions begin to surface.

Of particular value has been an understanding of racial identity development, the process by which each of us constructs meaning about what it means to be white or a person of color in a race-conscious society (Tatum 1992, 1997). For young people of color, the process often begins to unfold in early adolescence, typically in response to encounters with racism and often entails an initial period of anger and/or confusion and a desire to surround oneself with visible symbols of one's racial identity. Actively seeking opportunities to learn about one's history and culture in the company of other members of one's racial/ethnic group is a common response during the college years. For whites living in predominantly white areas, racial identity development may not begin to unfold until late adolescence or even later. It is often the experience of living in a diverse campus community that triggers the process for white students. Moving from lack of awareness of one's own whiteness to an awareness of racism and white privilege is often accompanied by feelings of guilt and/or anger and a desire to take action against racism. Coming to terms with cultural messages about white superiority and then defining for oneself what it means to be white is a central task of this identity development process.

The fact that adolescents of color and white youth are on very different developmental timelines in terms of racial identity development is a potential source of misunderstanding and conflict. However, sharing the process of racial identity development with students gives them a framework for understanding each other's processes as well as their own. This cognitive framework does not necessarily prevent conflict, but it does allow students to be less frightened or resentful when it occurs. For example, a white student in my psychology of racism course observed, "As a white person going through my stages of identity development, I do not take time to think about the struggle people of color go through to reach a stage of complete understanding. I am glad that I know about the stages because now I can understand people of color's behavior in certain situations." Similarly, a Latina student talked about the value of the information for her: "This article was the one that made me feel that my own prejudices were showing. I never knew that whites went through an identity development of their own." She later told me outside of class that she found it much easier to listen to some of the things white students said because she could understand their naïve —and sometimes offensive—comments as part of a developmental stage. Reducing both fear and resentment increases the possibility of engagement both in and outside the classroom—a precursor to the genuine building of community.

Cultivating leadership

Every institution of higher education sees itself as preparing the next generation for leadership and effective civic participation. But are we providing the tools needed for democratic participation and leadership in the twenty-first century? The multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious America of the late twentieth century is "truly a new frontier" (Eck 1996). What is required in this new context?

In their book, *Democratic Education in an Age of Difference* (1997, 8), Guarasci and Cornwell argue, "We need a democratic order that can contain the contradiction of difference and connection, self and community, one and many. It must be democracy in which commonality is understood as negotiated and constructed, not inherited or natural. This is a

community in which paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity can be appreciated rather than feared."

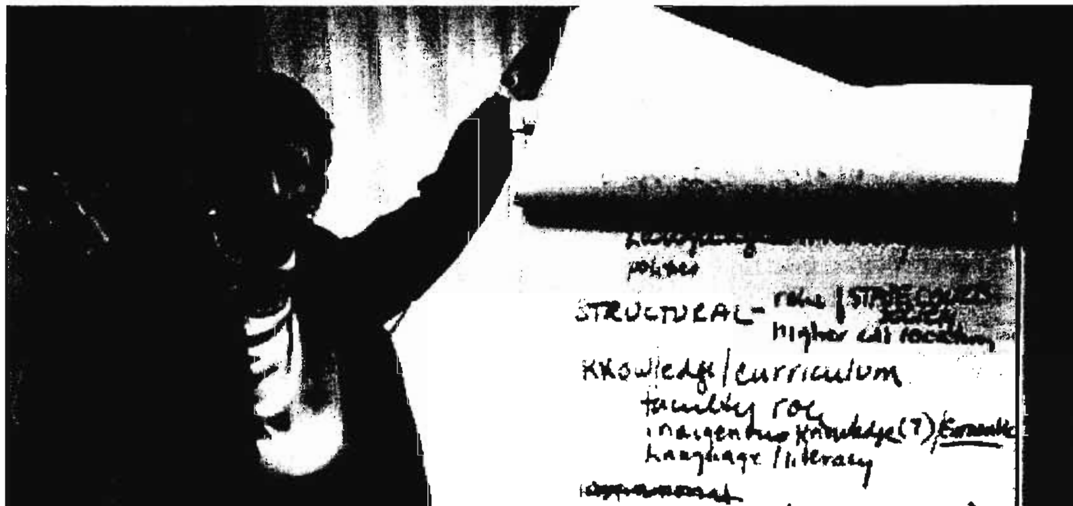
The critical thinking skills associated with a liberal arts education are essential for functioning effectively in such a democracy, but insufficient without experience. What is also needed is the opportunity for practice. Our efforts to affirm identity and build community inevitably create situations that allow students to engage in what Henry Giroux (1992) calls "border studies, the points of intersection, where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege" (209). When we encourage students to become border crossers, we are cultivating their capacity for leadership in the evolving democracy of the twenty-first century.

By absorbing a plethora of social and political agendas, liberal education has lost shape and direction

Some border crossing happens socially as students enter unfamiliar spaces on campus. For example, when "minority" students organize programming at their cultural centers and invite "majority" students to participate, a unique learning opportunity is created in that the invited students are required to shift their cultural lens "from the center to the margin." While there may be initial discomfort, the potential for learning is great. Such experiences are essential for developing the skills required to interact effectively in the increasingly pluralistic world. Faculty and administrators need to model this border-crossing behavior whenever possible and actively encourage students to follow suit.

Border crossing can be institutionalized in the curriculum as well. The Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community (IGRCC) Program at the University of Michigan is an excellent model that is being replicated at a number of universities around the United States. This multifaceted program includes academic courses (first year seminars as well as upper-level courses) that provide interdisciplinary understandings of intergroup relations, community, and conflict, as well as face-to-face intergroup dialogues, student leadership training, and workshops (Schoem 1997). The intergroup dialogues, in particular,

Tri-National Seminar



offer an opportunity to explore differing experiences of United States democracy and the impact of individual and group identity on the pursuit of equal opportunity. The interactive nature of the dialogue and the other pedagogical strategies used in these courses facilitate an experiential as well as a cognitive understanding of these topics.

Implementing the ABCs

A faculty member associated with the intergroup dialogue program at Michigan observed, "Students are not really choosing to be separate, but there is no vehicle to cross boundaries" (Schoem, 146). As we consider creating climates of engagement, we must be intentional in structuring opportunities to cross the long-standing boundaries that separate us in American society.

As we revamp old programs and consider new initiatives on our campuses, it is important to remember that our efforts to cultivate leadership must be built on the foundation of affirming identity and building community. The ABCs must be woven together in a seamless fabric if we are to maximize the benefits made available to us by our diverse communities. If we create a climate that supports pluralistic expression and provides authentic and sustained opportunities to practice, we and our students will be ready for the challenges and opportunities of this new frontier. □

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