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*The growing diversity and changing demographics within the United States increases the importance of students developing skills to engage across identity difference. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how a pre-employment course for student staff members is used as a multicultural intervention training to provide students with the knowledge and skills to create and facilitate an inclusive, multicultural community in residential communities.*

## Building Multicultural Residential Communities: A Model for Training Student Staff

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The growing diversity of the United States requires institutions of higher education to anticipate cultural differences from both a U.S. and a global context. The shifting demographics in the United States suggest that the population will be majority non-white by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013) suggest that increases in enrollment of Hispanic, African American, and Asian students, while white student enrollment decreases, create an important trend in higher education. In addition, immigration will provide a significant increase in the population of college students (Murdock and Hoque, 1999; Passel and Cohn, 2008). These likely demographic changes will provide a dynamic environment for learning as well as a challenge to higher education institutions to create communities of inclusivity and respect for differences.

Moving into a new environment, away from daily interactions and influences of family and former peers, provides students with new opportunities to learn and develop (Blimling and Miltenberger, 1995). Residential communities (residence halls and apartments) provide a multicultural living environment where students interact and live with individuals from varying cultures and social identity groups, which are often different from their home environment. Residential student staffs are charged with creating multicultural living environments inclusive of all residents and are often the first institutional representatives new students meet. This initial contact sets the tone and climate for helping students navigate the social and academic environments of their institution. For example, residents use

the community kitchens to cook foods that represent their cultures; the aromas while cooking challenge students to reconsider what smells “good” and “bad” and that sometimes these perceptions are based on their frame of reference and understanding of other cultures. If a conflict arises around kitchen use, it is situations like these require that student staff intervene to help students negotiate across difference.

At the University of Michigan, University Housing Residence Education has developed an academic course required for all student residential staff (Diversity Peer Educators, Resident Advisors, and Peer Academic Success Specialists) to prepare them for their respective jobs. Although each of the positions has unique responsibilities, their common goal is to provide a safe and supportive environment for every student in the residence community. The course, *Social Psychology in Community Settings*, serves as intervention training to provide students with the knowledge for being effective staff members. It also incorporates development of the skills one needs to live and work in our global society. Gurin (2013) suggests the skills that are needed for the twenty-first century are communication, problem solving, collaboration across difference, critical and flexible thinking, empathy, as well as the ability to nurture a pluralistic perspective. The course focuses on community building from a multicultural perspective.

Many of our students come from diverse backgrounds yet often have not encountered others who have different experiences from their own based on social identity. The presence of diversity in the student population creates an opportunity to engage students in learning about others as well as themselves while in order to better understand the value of difference. This course provides opportunities for students to engage in these learning experiences as participants and practice facilitating these experiences for their residents.

## **Course Development**

Considering the various issues that affect an inclusive and supportive environment in residential communities, the course was developed as an intentional collaboration between Residence Education, The Program on Intergroup Relations, and a faculty member. Each brings a particular strength to the design of the program areas.

Residence Education provides practical knowledge about the living environment and opportunity for “real” experiential learning. Furthermore, the trained program staff members who lead the course understand how to build inclusive residential communities with students from differing backgrounds and developmental levels (Piper and Buckley, 2004). The second partner, the Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR), is a nationally recognized program for developing intergroup dialogues in higher education. As the first such program in higher education, it is well known specifically for its work with training peer facilitators in intergroup dialogue and social

justice education. IGR brings a wealth of experience with pedagogy that uses cognitive and experiential learning methods, as well as dialogic techniques to provide a classroom environment that integrates learning from students lived experience and course materials. The faculty member is the third partner to the course and provides the academic connection. Social inequality, intergroup interactions, and building interpersonal empathy are important aspects of the course that draw upon the rich social psychology literature that relates to students' work across identities and in inclusive communities (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004; Stephan and Finlay, 1999). The faculty member's participation connects the course academic credit for students and this serves as validation of the importance of the educational value of the residential student work.

The faculty member and one representative from each area serve as lead coordinators for the course. These coordinators develop the curriculum, select and train small group facilitators, provide leadership throughout the semester, and oversee course assessment.

### **Structure and Co-Facilitation**

Although the course is constructed to engage students in integrated learning and reflection, the large number of students (180–200 each year) all together prohibits the type of exploration necessary for deep learning to occur. Instead, the course is divided into small groups of 12–16 students and is co-facilitated by an experienced student and a professional staff member. The goal is to select a diverse team of professional and student staff that encompass a variety of experiences and social identities. The benefits of having a diverse team of co-facilitations for the small groups are that each brings their own complementary styles; there is a mix of social identities as well as professional and student roles. As with the intergroup dialogue model, it is important for course participants to have access to someone who has a social identity similar to their own, specifically a facilitator who has knowledge of privilege, power, and difference and can empathize with the learning edges that arise when talking about these issues (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker, 2007).

### **Curriculum**

Using theory, practice, and experiential learning, the course engages students personally and encourages them to draw upon their own knowledge and experiences as part of the learning process. Influenced by the four-stage intergroup dialogue model (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker, 2007), the course has four modules integrated over eleven weeks: identity development, power and privilege in intergroup relations, working through conflict, and communication and ally development. The focus is based on understanding and bridging identity differences and is explicitly geared

toward putting those concepts into action when serving as a staff member in a residence community setting. The course meets fourteen times, with an introductory session for the entire large group, twelve small group sessions, and a culminating event. The curriculum is designed to elaborate on each module through utilizing journals, readings, media, assignments, and experiential activities to emphasize the partnership between academic and student services.

**Identity Development.** Identity exploration is the basis for students to begin to understand their own and others' gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religious/faith affiliation, ability status, and other social identities. It is the foundation for all other learning in our curriculum. Residence staff must first gain an understanding of who they are and the types of experiences that have an effect on how they view themselves and others. While identity development can (and does) occur throughout the life cycle, college students are formulating who they are, independent of family, friends, influential people, and social structures, which have thus far provided information and guidance to them. Baxter Magolda (2001) describes this part of a students' journey as the first phase of self-authorship, "The Crossroads," where students begin the search for internally defining their beliefs, goals, values, and self-definition. The readings that provide a foundation for this module include Beverly Tatum's (1997) "The Complexity of Identity: Who Am I?" as well as various first person narratives on social identity exploration. Activities that provide an experiential bridge in this module may include the Social Identity Profile where students are asked to identify the group memberships to which they belong and to reflect on how these identities will affect their interactions in the residential communities. For example, students are asked to consider how their race and/or ethnicity will impact on how they enter conflict mediation with individuals who are different from themselves. Students also develop and share a "testimonial" on two of their salient identities as a way of deeply exploring the understanding of their own socialization. Sharing their own stories, listening to others, and connecting these personal stories to group identities better prepare residence staff to empathize with others and understand the important role that social identities play in building inclusive communities.

**Power and Privilege in Intergroup Relations.** The second module is developed to help students examine personal values, biases, and attitudes that they hold about race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, and other identities. Students learn to recognize how these values and attitudes influence their decision making, particularly in regard to building community, creating resident programs, and supporting students individually. The primary goal is to analyze difference, privilege, justice, and injustice as they apply to a residential setting. The learning that occurs in the second module helps staff to understand how these issues come into play when mediating conflicts, confronting behaviors, and

planning community builder programs. The “Social Inequality on Campus” group assignment is an example of how this type of learning is facilitated. Students work in small groups to explore a social inequality on campus and its effects on students and the dynamics of the community. Readings that support this type of active learning include chapters from Allen Johnson’s (2006) book, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, as well as additional readings that showcase personal experiences around discrimination and oppression. This assignment allows students to think critically about inequalities that exist within their own communities and brings to life the classroom conversations, readings, and assignments. Students are able to reflect on their sphere of influence to act on inequalities that may exist in their residential communities.

**Working through Conflict and Communication.** Managing conflict and communication effectively with all residents is an important job responsibility for student staff. The vast majority of conflict involves issues related to culture, social identity, beliefs, and values. Successful conflict resolution is often determined by the skill level of the staff managing these situations and encouraging individuals to talk about the underlying issues of the conflict (Blimling, 1993). Many conflict resolution situations often stem from disagreements as a result of residence-hall-related policy infractions, roommate differences, and community living standards. This module focuses on understanding personal conflict and communication styles within the context of residential communities.

One way that students are able to explore the above is through an activity called the “Listening Exercise.” This exercise is used to deepen active listening skills while exploring the ways in which the students own family units handled emotions as conflict when growing up. In triads, the students explore a conflict (the how, what, and when of issues). Each student has the opportunity to be a listener and an observer while the talker addresses questions that refer to the above topics. Through reflection, peer feedback, and large group debriefing, students gain insight into how their past experiences affect how they will respond when conflict, emotions, and differing forms of communication styles are present in the residence hall. The students also read Janet Rifkin and Leah Wing’s (2001) chapter “Racial Identity Development and the Readings/Videotion of Conflicts” from Jackson and Wijeyesinghe’s book, *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: A Theoretical and Practical Anthology*.

The culminating event, “Behind Community Doors,” occurs at the end of the semester and allows students to practice responding to relevant situations involving social identity within the residential environment.

**Ally Development.** This last module bridges the learning of the first three modules that focus specifically on developing intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness and skills by exploring what it means to be an ally and to assess the role of an ally as it relates to building an inclusive community.

Residential staff are asked to create and sustain an environment where all social identities feel safe and welcomed in their community. This is a challenging component of the position. It is important for staff to identify both their areas of intergroup strength and knowledge and those they need to develop.

In addition to readings on social justice ally development, such as Keith Edwards's (2006) article, "Aspiring Social Justice Ally Identity Development," students are asked to fill out an ally profile that guides reflection on their own awareness, skills, knowledge, and abilities to take ally action on all social identities. Through small group conversations, this activity allows individuals to see areas for growth and support.

**Assessment and Evaluation.** Throughout the semester, students develop an ePortfolio (electronic portfolio) to demonstrate to their facilitators and future supervisors in the residential communities what they have learned about identity, inequality, conflict, and ally development, and what skills they have gained that will make them an effective staff member. Zubizarreta (2009) states, "The learning portfolio is a rich, convincing, and adaptable method of recording intellectual growth and involving students in a critically reflective, collaborative process" (p. xxvii). The ePortfolio provides a representation of their integrated learning and skill development that they can refer back to as well as change and amplify as they function in their residence staff and other organizational/community roles.

Students also have an opportunity to provide feedback around course curriculum and co-facilitators through the course evaluations provided by the Office of the Registrar. To ensure that the goals and learning outcomes are being met, we utilize these evaluations as well as feedback from the facilitators on the curriculum to adapt and modify the course on a yearly basis.

## Course Challenges

Four major areas have been identified as crucial to the development of residential staff in building inclusive communities: understanding multiple identities and intersectionality, contradictions between personal values and employment expectations, understanding underlying issues of conflict, and application to the staff position. This section will explore how these areas create challenges that arise with implementing the course and how we address them.

**Understanding Multiple Identities and Intersectionality.** Time is spent in the course identifying social-group memberships and how social identities are impacted by privilege and oppression in society. As these concepts are explored, students experience difficulty connecting multiple identities and understanding the concept of intersectionality. There are times when privileged and oppressed identities cannot be separated and

students often default to focusing on their marginalized identities rather than those where advantages are awarded. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, testimonials are introduced to assist students in keeping a perspective that includes all of their identities. Testimonials also provide facilitators with insights as to where students are in their understanding of privilege so they can assist students through their journey.

**Contradictions between Personal Values and Employment Expectations.** Throughout the course, students begin to discover contradictions between their beliefs, values, and expectations of the course. One of the goals of the course is for students to understand and develop ally behaviors to use in their staff positions. Broido (2000) describes social justice allies as members of dominant social groups who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership. In the context of their role, student staff need to be aware of the ways in which residents' social identities are impacted by privilege and oppression, and actively work to create environments where students of all identities are supported. Conflict arises when students' beliefs and values target another social group. One way we have observed this conflict manifest is in a student whose religious identity holds beliefs that oppress lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Here, oppression may range from discomfort in discussing LGBTQ experiences to outright refusal to support residents. Determining and communicating clear expectations of staff members around ally behavior is important and crucial to the mission, vision, and values of the Housing organization. In these conversations, facilitators relay to students that if they are unable to meet these expectations of an ally, then the staff position may not be for them. The course coordinators consider this expectation when making staff position decisions.

**Understanding Underlying Issues of Conflict.** Given the course consists of personal experiences and narratives of power and privilege, conflicting opinions and perceptions will emerge. Students perceive conflict in different ways, and their attitudes on conflict are often negative. Further, students see conflict as oppositional and argument-debate based. Working through conflict and understanding the underlying issues on interpersonal, intergroup, and cultural levels is a hurdle for many students. Facilitators reframe dialogue as a method for students to work through differences and conflict. They also assist students in naming and exploring how identity and culture shape our conflict attitudes and behaviors. The hope is that students leave the course with experiences that demonstrate how conflict can be a necessary part of the learning process and how social identity impacts situations in residential communities.

**Application to the Staff Position.** The last challenge is one that persists as the course evolves over the semester. It presents a simple question: how do students take what they have learned and put it to use in the

residence hall and apartment communities? This is particularly challenging as we cover such a volume of material, exercises, and concepts. It is critical for facilitators to link the theories explored in the group settings to how they will build community in their residence halls. We attempt to mediate this challenge and make the connection to their day-to-day work by asking reflective questions, linking experiences to their own community settings, and encouraging them to utilize the information gathered in their ePortfolio as a guide for their work. In addition, we acknowledge that more work must be done after the course to ensure that supervisors within the communities reinforce the course content throughout the year with their residential staff as they are leading their residents.

### **Application for Other Campuses**

First and foremost, the commitment of the course requires support from all levels of the institution. It is important that commitment is supported through clearly communicated mission and vision statements that indicate the department's stance on identity, inclusion, and social justice. At the University of Michigan, these declarations exist at multiple levels in the Division of Student Affairs, Housing's Living at Michigan credo, and values of Residence Education.

Inclusive hiring practices must exist if a unit decides to engage in socially just work. In order to have a representative staff across the social spectrum, supervisors have to understand the value of difference. Therefore, supervisors must be trained in order to equip them with the skills to work within diverse teams. They need to develop these tools by having training experiences that is similar to what the students received via the course. To assist in consistency across the department, all Residence Education professional staff attend an annual two-day workshop that is focused on exploring concepts of identity, privilege, oppression, and ally work.

We considered the concentration structure for the course, both for student participants and facilitators. By offering course credit to students (both as participants and as facilitators), it is rendered significant because it exists both in the academic and co-curricular realms. Students are held accountable both academically and as a condition for employment. Facilitating this course adds an additional 8–10 hours of work per week for the duration of the course. It is critical to explore ways to recognize the significant contributions of facilitators. As mentioned above, student facilitators are offered three academic credits for taking on this role. Financial compensation is given to both student and professional staff facilitators (though course coordinators are not compensated). Given the ever-changing fiscal climate, this may not be a sustainable model for other campuses. Regardless, it is critical to explore ways to recognize the significant contributions of facilitators.



The course outlined is only one component of building an inclusive multicultural residential community at the University of Michigan. Given the changing demographics and the ever-evolving nature of campus communities, our staff has ongoing training that considers social justice aspects of the environment. It is important that we remain attuned to demographic changes and that we are constantly exploring ways to support all students in the community. This course is a useful tool and will be updated as needed to reflect the needs of the students who attend our university and the changes in the residential community environment.

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