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*Participants in intergroup dialogue examine the significance of social identities and social inequalities and practice intergroup communication and collaboration skills.*

## Intergroup Dialogue and Democratic Practice in Higher Education

*Gretchen E. Lopez, Ximena Zúñiga*

Academic communities must learn to address many of the social divisions, misunderstandings, and inequities of society as a whole. Although challenging, this offers tremendous opportunities for educators to develop, study, and learn from innovative programs that respond effectively to these social issues on college and university campuses. This knowledge may then be shared with our wider communities. This chapter introduces one such initiative, intergroup dialogue.

Intergroup dialogue is “a face-to-face facilitated learning experience that brings together students from different social identity groups over a sustained period of time to understand their commonalities and differences, examine the nature and impact of societal inequalities, and explore ways of working together toward greater equality and justice” (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker, 2007, p. 2). As examples, intergroup dialogues may bring together students (or faculty, staff) across race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religion- or faith-based divisions.

Intergroup dialogue represents an important approach for preparing students for multicultural democracy because it challenges students to grasp the significance of social identities and exercise critical imagination in understanding and taking action with others. Intergroup dialogue is distinct from other initiatives as it focuses on intergroup understanding and action while having students study and address the roots and consequences of structural inequalities. Through the practice of intergroup dialogue, students build experiential knowledge and leadership capacities for developing relationships across differences and conflicts, and for working collaboratively toward needed social change.

This learning and practice is significant from both the perspective of higher education leaders and current students. As examples, university

and college presidents including Nancy Cantor (Syracuse University) and Beverly Daniel Tatum (Spelman College), also noted scholars on race and affirmative action, advocate for intergroup dialogue as a means to provide students with opportunities to practice engaging difference, and especially engaging difference within contemporary contexts of unequal power and privilege (Cantor, 2006, 2008; Tatum, 2007). Students also articulate the significance of learning through intergroup dialogue. One student, in an interview following an intergroup dialogue course, captured the need and importance of knowing and practicing the skill of active listening: “one of the biggest things that I took away . . . is active listening, which I don’t think I really knew much about or did or practiced before this class.” Another intergroup dialogue student wrote in a final paper about connecting newly acquired content knowledge with the need to take action: “This class has made me realize that I cannot be satisfied in just being educated on societal truths and realities. It is not enough to read about them, I must begin to actually do something about it.”

Research studies further support this connection. Intergroup dialogue presents an important opportunity for students and others to practice the skills needed to cultivate diverse democratic culture in higher education and broader society.

### **Intergroup Dialogue: Academic Courses**

Intergroup dialogue programs differ across institutions with each tailored to the specific needs of the campus, school, academic department, or student affairs unit that it serves. Undergraduate dialogue courses are generally offered for academic credit through Psychology, Sociology, Education, Social Work, American Culture, or other interdisciplinary programs or departments. The courses typically have twelve to eighteen students with fairly equal numbers of students from each of the social identity groups brought together through the dialogue course (based on student self-identification). Working toward this balance is helpful in acknowledging the historically unequal status across groups and the frequent unfair assumption of, or burden on, individual students representing (what is perceived as) the “whole group.” Although intergroup dialogue courses are organized around a particular social issue and associated set of social identities, the pedagogy includes analysis of intersecting social identities and the heterogeneity and complexity of within-group, as well as between-group, difference. The design of the courses is informed by social psychological research on intergroup contact, as well as educational theory for democratic, critical, multicultural, and social justice education (Adams, 2007; Pettigrew, 1998; Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker, 2007).

Undergraduate courses are co-led by two trained or experienced facilitators who identify with the social groups in the dialogue. On some campuses facilitators are undergraduate students (peers), on other campuses

they are graduate students, and on still others they are faculty or student affairs staff (or combination). Facilitators generally work from a structured curriculum to guide the dialogue and are carefully selected, prepared, and mentored (Schoem and Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga and others, 2007). Students complete weekly reading and weekly written reflections, a final paper, and a collaborative group project.

### **Educational Benefits for Students**

The effectiveness of intergroup dialogue has been studied for some time, most recently through the Multiversity Intergroup Dialogue Research Project. This multi-institutional collaboration included researchers and practitioners—faculty, graduate students, administrators, and program staff—representing institutions with both longstanding and new intergroup dialogue courses. Participating institutions included Arizona State University, Occidental College, Syracuse University, University of California-San Diego, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, University of Texas-Austin, and University of Washington. This multidisciplinary team designed and implemented a common intergroup dialogue curriculum and researched educational benefits with funding over a three-year period from the Ford Foundation and W. T. Grant Foundation.

On each of the nine campuses, project collaborators offered two courses in conjunction with the study. One course focused on race and ethnicity and the other focused on gender. There were over 1400 participants, with approximately equal percentages of white women and white men, and women of color and men of color including African American, Latino/a, Asian American, Arab American, and Native American students. The study used a multimethod, longitudinal design to assess effects across educational institutions and educational impact over time. Collaborators collected quantitative data, survey data based on earlier research, and qualitative data including students' final papers, videotaped class sessions, and individual student interviews.

On each campus, interested students submitted an application to take an intergroup dialogue course; from this pool students were randomly selected for placement into the courses or a waitlist control group (including over 700 students in each). The application and random assignment process addressed research concerns about self-selection; that is, the alternative argument that it is students' interest in gender or racial and ethnic issues that explains any change over time. The study further compared intergroup dialogue students to students in introductory social science courses. The results summarized here provide an overall picture of educational benefits based on quantitative survey results for dialogue and waitlist control students, and qualitative analysis of dialogue student final papers and interviews.

Research efforts focused on three categories of expected educational outcomes: intergroup understanding, intergroup relationships, and intergroup collaboration (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, and Zúñiga, 2009). *Intergroup understanding* includes how students think about intergroup relations in the context of broader society, including students' awareness of structural causes of group inequalities. *Intergroup relationships* include affective and motivational aspects of group interactions, such as desire and ability to connect with individuals across groups through empathy (being aware and feeling connected to experiences, perspectives, and emotions of others) or bridging difference (sharing experiences and educating and learning about others). *Intergroup collaboration* captures students' engagement in individual and collective actions that address bias and challenge institutional discrimination.

Recent publications reporting survey results from the project offer strong support for intergroup dialogue having a positive effect for these educational outcomes. Comparing student change from the start to the end of the semester, intergroup dialogue students, when compared to waitlist control students, demonstrated significant change in awareness of group inequalities (intergroup understanding), empathy and motivation to bridge difference (intergroup relations), and frequency and confidence in taking action individually or with others (intergroup collaboration; Nagda and others, 2009). These findings are consistent with previous studies that reported positive effects of intergroup dialogue for students' awareness of group inequalities and action intentions (Lopez, Gurin, and Nagda, 1998; Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez, 2003). They are also consistent with previous studies on motivation to bridge difference and studies examining a broader set of democratic outcomes (Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez, 2004; Nagda, 2006; Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003). Further results demonstrate that a number of dialogue effects, based on longitudinal survey data, persist up to one year later (Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, and Maxwell, 2009).

Other analyses delve deeper into these findings. For example, student participation in dialogue courses has been found to have an effect on students' understanding of the structural causes of racial and gender inequalities specifically (Lopez and Galbato, 2010; Lopez and Sorensen, 2009; Sorensen, 2010). This increase in structural analysis extends to understanding of poverty, even though the primary emphasis in the courses was on race or gender. These effects for intergroup dialogue, based on an overall summary measure of structural analysis of group inequalities, persist over time. Furthermore, structural analysis of group inequalities is associated with students' sense of efficacy for and post-college commitment to taking action. This is important because intergroup dialogue contributed to increased understanding of social problems while also motivating students to engage change.

Research based on individual interviews (248 students) provides further insight into how students reflect on learning through intergroup dialogue.

Qualitative analysis of the interviews identifies the importance for participants of learning about and practicing dialogic communication skills as a critical foundation for intergroup learning. Students' narratives identify listening to diverse peers' experiences as crucial in coming to a deeper understanding of power and privilege (Keehn, Mildred, Zúñiga, and DeJong, 2010). Listening to and learning from diverse peers, in addition to content-based learning, appears to help dialogue students develop multiple ways of making meaning of their experiences and observations. Additional results point to the importance of both verbal engagement and listening engagement for dialogue participants, and how the dynamic interplay between these two forms of student participation stimulate a range of reactions—cognitive, emotional, behavioral—and deeper forms of learning (Zúñiga, DeJong, and others, 2009). Further qualitative analysis highlights how dialogue students write and talk about action and future commitments including educating self, educating others, and working with others to create change on campus, the community, and social institutions (Zúñiga, Torres-Zickler, and others, 2009).

In sum, research findings lend strong support for the educational impact of intergroup dialogue courses in preparing students to engage differences while developing a richer understanding of complex social issues and imagining what is possible with a new sense of agency.

### **University–Community Connections**

At both the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and Syracuse University, intergroup dialogue efforts are led through the School of Education. At the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, the Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) Program is part of the Social Justice Education masters program, which focuses on preparing reflective practitioners who can demonstrate competency in the knowledge, awareness, and skills needed to plan, implement, and evaluate effective education programs in kindergarten through twelfth grade and higher education settings. Graduate students enroll in a theory and practice course sequence, facilitating undergraduate dialogue courses in the second semester.

At Syracuse University, the program is administered through Cultural Foundations of Education with support from Academic Affairs and the Chancellor's Initiative Fund. Intergroup dialogue courses are cross-listed in Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies, meet the College of Arts and Sciences critical reflections requirement, and are open to students from across colleges at the university. The teaching team for the undergraduate courses includes faculty, graduate students, and student affairs administrators who meet together weekly throughout the semester.

The program efforts on these campuses link intergroup dialogue to broader institutional and community efforts. For example, Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the

University of Massachusetts at Amherst partnered with the Social Justice Education Program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to implement the Five Colleges IGD Initiative. The initiative develops the capacity of faculty and staff to facilitate both one-time and sustained intergroup dialogues focused on race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and rank and class. A Five Colleges, Inc. IGD Training Institute was held in June 2009, with approximately sixty faculty and staff from across campuses learning dialogue facilitation skills. During the subsequent fall, “Days of Dialogue” were organized with each campus holding dialogue events on issues of race, gender, class, and religion. During spring 2010, a small group of faculty and staff interested in facilitating sustained efforts participated in five-week dialogues, followed by three-part dialogue facilitation training. The anticipated impact includes expanding the use of intergroup dialogue in the classroom and the workplace and providing students, faculty, and staff with shared language and skills for inhabiting and engaging increasingly diverse educational and community environments.

As another example, the program at Syracuse University partners with local high school teachers to offer a one-day institute on campus for eighty to ninety area students. These students have been involved in a teacher-initiated curriculum focusing on “race, rhetoric, and cultural voices” developed across two schools: one urban with an ethnically diverse student body, and one suburban with a predominantly white student body. The institute is organized around learning about dialogic communication, small group activities facilitated by university practitioners and graduate students, interactive presentations by faculty and staff, and student writing, analysis, and civic engagement. The focus during spring 2010 was “Raising Our Voices,” including individually and collectively composed poems, connecting music and spoken word poetry, and planning group letters to advocate for educational or community change. The institute creates opportunity for teachers and students, university faculty, and graduate students to cross and blur school and community lines. The work requires institutions, as well as students, to meet the challenge of democratic practice and to experience its demands and promises in physical proximity with one another.

What these examples share, in design and aspiration, is capacity building for purposeful dialogic practices that can help develop a more democratic culture in higher education and our wider communities. These dialogues take place across different locations and involve faculty and staff, in addition to students. They support continuous and varied offerings and integrate the knowledge and skills of intergroup dialogue into new contexts, and educational and leadership roles.

## Summary

As Beverly Tatum (2007) asserts, “Leadership in the twenty-first century not only requires the ability to think critically and speak and write effectively,

it also demands the ability to interact effectively with others from different backgrounds. The development of each of these abilities requires opportunities to practice” (p. 117).

Intergroup dialogues—and the institutional and student commitment and work that undergird them—may be challenging and time-intensive, but they are also clearly needed and effective. Research offers strong support for the promise of intergroup dialogue in preparing informed and engaged students and collaborative leaders. In sum, intergroup dialogue provides an important opportunity to develop and practice the understanding and collaboration needed to address social group divisions and inequalities in educational contexts and communities.

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GRETCHEN E. LOPEZ is assistant professor of Cultural Foundations of Education in the School of Education at Syracuse University.

XIMENA ZÚÑIGA is associate professor of Education, Social Justice Education at University of Massachusetts at Amherst.



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