

Conversations on Race in Helena-West Helena

Overview

The Arkansas community of Helena-West Helena is one split by race and poverty; the invisible lines of demarcation manifest in churches, schools, local government, and businesses. A physical boundary between the previously two cities once designed to separate poor from rich, black from white, still exists – an ominous artifact silently, powerfully reminding all of a community racially divided.

Recognizing the challenge to heal racial differences, a team of four Clinton School students partnered with 12 faculty and staff from Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (PCCUA) to initiate community conversations on race during the 2010-11 school year. Together they co-created a curriculum and facilitator's training manual centered on initiating dialogue and tackling the difficult issues of race that create barriers – visible and invisible – between people.

The Community Need

In Helena-West Helena, divisions can be seen in the churches, schools, local government, and businesses and even in the physical boundary between what were once the two different cities of Helena and West Helena. Community members separate themselves based on identifiers such as income, the choice of where to send their children to school (either the private school, public school or the KIPP charter school), and race (PCCUA first meeting, personal communication, August 31, 2010). While the causes of these separations are complex, race has been a predominate divider in Helena-West Helena (PCCUA first meeting).

Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas is a multi-campus institution with the mission to serve individual students, organizations, and the general community in the Eastern Arkansas region. The college recently adopted the mission to “engage in the lives of students and the community” (PCCUA, 1). Some members of the Helena-West Helena community cite PCCUA as the neutral ground of the city because it is one of the most racially integrated institutions (PCCUA first meeting). In an area with such divisiveness, the campus' location in the middle of Helena and West Helena makes the campus ideal for bringing people together. PCCUA sought to address issues faced in Helena-West Helena by confronting them with open and honest communication within their campus community.

Field Work

The Clinton School team worked to develop a structure to enact a small-group dialogue-to-action project addressing the issue of race. The team used a collaborative process that would allow a core group of twelve faculty and staff to provide continual feedback and suggestions through a process of sharing, listening, evaluating, and revising. They created a curriculum and facilitator's training manual for community conversations on race tailored to the needs of Phillips Community College.

The Clinton School students moved through four phases.

- Building relationships:

Drawing upon both PCCUA's local wisdom and the Clinton team's research expertise, the relationship blossomed.

- Curriculum development:

Researching best-practices from three distinct national dialogue curricula, the Clinton team and PCCUA group designed a hybrid curriculum tailored to the unique needs of the community.

- Evaluation of Project and Feedback:

Surveys were developed for participants pre- and post-curriculum facilitation to evaluate both the content and process.

- Recommendations & Sustainability:

Recommendations for moving forward and maintaining sustainability were given. PCCUA leadership adopted the curriculum and facilitation manual devised by the team.

Current status of the project

- The campus leadership decided to employ the adapted curriculum, the facilitator training manual, and the information gained from the actual conversations to inform future attempts to coordinate these dialogues. This system was ultimately put into PCCUA's operating structure to ensure the continuation of these conversations and expansion to the larger community.

Beyond the tangible outcomes of this project, members of the two groups became empowered through their mutual interaction. The practices of equal participation, listening with empathy, and honest dialogue were some of the essential skills developed through their shared exploration of the problem of racism. Continuous dialogue grew into a systematic process of consultation, action, and reflection.