

A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

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The inspiration for this contribution came from so many conversations with colleagues (many of them fellow division 45 members) who find themselves in an all too familiar place: at a predominantly White university, struggling with how to improve on a number of diversity fronts. The great irony is that many of these institutions have formal, detailed plans about how to accomplish several diversity oriented goals, but those initiatives too frequently fail to have meaningful impact at the level of the academic unit or department. The lack of a coordinated plan of attack to advance diversity initiatives at the department level forces these units to rely on the trickle-down benefits from overall improvements at the university level. Unfortunately, this leaves very few tangible and visible products to affect the daily lives of most students and faculty in a department. This disparity motivated a number of graduate students in my department and me to take action! Below we share some of the results of our efforts and the beginnings of a promising program in the hopes that it may provide a starting point for others in similar situations.

In December 2006, we surveyed students and faculty in our Clinical Psychology Program about their satisfaction with regard to several diversity issues (representation, integration into curriculum, climate). The results suggested that there was much room for improvement and provided the impetus for the formation of BRIDGE, a diversity alliance between faculty and students focused on taking action to promote diversity. Initially, BRIDGE focused on improving the climate around diversity issues and was limited to the clinical area. However, the initiatives and events sponsored by BRIDGE were so well received that our size, scope and mission have since expanded. Currently, the overarching goal of BRIDGE is to systematically address the multiple challenges outlined in our university's strategic plan for addressing diversity, but with a limited focus on the department of psychology. Its specific aims are threefold: 1) To improve the climate in the department for students, faculty, and staff from underrepresented groups who have traditionally felt alienated in academic settings, 2) To increase the number of students and faculty from underrepresented groups through targeted recruitment of underrepresented applicants, and 3) To increase the quality of training in issues related to diverse populations (including classroom instruction, talks, special workshops, etc.) in the recognition that cultural competence will continue to grow in importance as students enter the workforce. To ensure that each aim receives appropriate attention, we created

three semi-autonomous subcommittees within BRIDGE to address each aim. These subcommittees consist of 4-6 members who meet at the beginning of each semester to determine goals related to their specific aim. Subcommittees then share their progress toward their goals and solicit suggestions and feedback from others at larger BRIDGE meetings. In addition, there is a general steering committee established to oversee the overall functioning of BRIDGE and to ensure that there is constant communication between subcommittees and the steering committee and between these entities and me.

Although it is still quite early, a number of indicators point to the group's promise. First, participation in BRIDGE has spread to outside of the clinical area and now has representatives from all five areas in the Psychology Department on both the faculty and student fronts. Second, we have implemented a number of changes that appear to have considerable staying power and many more to come. These include a welcome picnic for first year graduate students with a cultural introduction to the area, a regular series of diversity themed talks, and an introductory meeting with graduate applicants to our department. Data collected from these applicants suggests that not only does the presence of BRIDGE make our department more attractive, but it might have even encouraged a couple of applications from underrepresented students that might not have come otherwise. Finally, as the old saying goes, "money talks"...and we are listening! Our group received a university grant to expand our efforts in 2009 and this fund was renewed in 2010. We have also garnered increasing financial support within the department as the potential of BRIDGE continues to grow. All goods signs! And while this is certainly not the only program of its kind (see Robbie Steward's efforts at Michigan State and similar programs), we hope that by making our efforts known more publicly we can inspire others to take up the challenge of advancing diversity and maybe help others who have been advocates all along. After all, we can never have too much focus on diversity!

Give birth to a book? Been given a new title? Have exciting research to report? Something else of interest to share with our Division 45 colleagues?

Please send your submissions to FOCUS Newsletter Editor, Dr. Melissa Morgan, by September 1, 2010 to mmorgan@education.ucsb.edu to be included in the next edition of FOCUS.