



Dialogue Across Difference: Practice, Theory, and Research on Intergroup Dialogue

Patricia Gurin, Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, Ximena Zuniga

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Due to continuing immigration and increasing racial and ethnic inclusiveness, higher education institutions in the United States are likely to grow ever more diverse in the 21st century. This shift holds both promise and peril: Increased inter-ethnic contact could lead to a more fruitful learning environment that encourages collaboration. On the other hand, social identity and on-campus diversity remain hotly contested issues that often raise intergroup tensions and inhibit discussion. How can we help diverse students learn from each other and gain the competencies they will need in an increasingly multicultural America? *Dialogue Across Difference* synthesizes three years' worth of research from an innovative field experiment focused on improving intergroup understanding, relationships and collaboration. The result is a fascinating study of the potential of intergroup dialogue to improve relations across race and gender.

First developed in the late 1980s, intergroup dialogues bring together an equal number of students from two different groups – such as people of color and white people, or women and men – to share their perspectives and learn from each other. To test the possible impact of such courses and to develop a standard of best practice, the authors of *Dialogue Across Difference* incorporated various theories of social psychology, higher education, communication studies and social work to design and implement a uniform curriculum in nine universities across the country. Unlike most studies on intergroup dialogue, this project employed random assignment to enroll more than 1,450 students in experimental and control groups, including in 26 dialogue courses and control groups on race and gender each. Students admitted to the dialogue courses learned about racial and gender inequalities through readings, role-play activities and personal reflections. The authors tracked students' progress using a mixed-method approach, including longitudinal surveys, content analyses of student papers, interviews of students, and videotapes of sessions. The results are heartening: Over the course of a term, students who participated in intergroup dialogues developed more insight into how members of other groups perceive the world. They also became more thoughtful about the structural underpinnings of inequality, increased their motivation to bridge differences and intergroup empathy, and placed a greater value on diversity and collaborative action. The authors also note that the effects of such courses were evident on nearly all measures. While students did report an initial increase in negative emotions – a possible indication of the difficulty of openly addressing race and gender – that effect was no longer present a year after the course. Overall, the results are remarkably consistent and point to an optimistic conclusion: intergroup dialogue is more than mere talk. It fosters productive communication about and across differences in the service of greater collaboration for equity and justice.

Ambitious and timely, *Dialogue Across Difference* presents a persuasive practical, theoretical and empirical account of the benefits of intergroup dialogue. The data and research presented in this volume offer a useful model for improving relations among different groups not just in the college setting but in the United States as well.

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