



Diversity ProActors:

A Different Approach to Community Service and Outreach

Everyone has a story. Often as complex and intricate as the individuals themselves, these narratives provide powerful learning opportunities when brought to life. For nearly eight years, the Diversity ProActors in the division of housing and food services at Purdue University have used their narratives to engage one another and their audiences in meaningful diversity dialogue that goes beyond lecture and PowerPoint. Through news clips, celebrity interviews pulled from the media and game show formats that help teach concepts, paradigms and frameworks, the ProActors have managed to make diversity training relevant, engaging and truly innovative. As word of the ProActors program has spread, diversity education and outreach efforts that began as an internal initiative now reach beyond the confines of the housing and food services division and into the larger Purdue community as well as the Lafayette, Indiana, community.

Humble Beginnings

The idea of a peer-to-peer training format grew out of the need to make diversity training more meaningful, engaging and transformative for Purdue's housing and food services (HFS) division employees. While the more traditional approach to diversity training was effective for members of HFS's administrative professional staff, the division needed to find ways to better engage its nearly 600 clerical and service employees in the diversity conversation. In the summer of 2004, as part of HFS's Promoting Unity Through Diversity initiative (which was led by the division's office of the vice president for human resources), 18 HFS administrators were handpicked by their supervisors to attend a two-day workshop to learn the skills of InterActive theatre, where trainers proactively engage audience members to make learning a more transformative process. These full-time employees, stretched

beyond the usual demands of their 8-5 jobs, took it upon themselves on a strictly volunteer basis to create a space in which difficult and often controversial issues of diversity could be discussed from new perspectives and in creative ways.

Admittedly, two days of InterActive training did not equip the group, which called itself the HFS Diversity ProActors, to be professional actors, but they were prepared to turn seemingly ordinary narratives into short dramatic sketches to amicably provoke conversation among their

group of 18, the ProActors have gone on to train additional HFS employees as ProActors and have designed four additional training initiatives.

Building a House for Diversity

Building a House for Diversity was launched in the spring of 2006. The program was adapted from Roosevelt Thomas's book, *Building a House for Diversity: How a Fable About a Giraffe and an Elephant Offers New Strategies for Today's Workforce*. The initial program was developed to

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coworkers. To these trainers, the success was not in the acting, but in the reality behind the stories that resonated with the experiences of those in the audience.

Upon completion of the two days of training, reflection and teambuilding, and with the full support of HFS leadership, this group of volunteers set out to take the division and the institution into uncharted territories and begin a new chapter in the ongoing efforts to create and promote a community that, as the HFS diversity competency statement reads, "acknowledges, affirms and values differences, similarities and worth" of an increasingly diverse workforce and increasingly diverse communities.

The newly-minted ProActors' first training program, Unity Through Diversity, was performed before a group of nearly 180 HFS administrative and professional staff at Purdue's Elliott Hall of Music. The impact of this newly-created diversity training sparked a division-wide interest that resulted in a successful three-month road show within the HFS division. Since its inception, the Unity Through Diversity program has been presented 18 different times to more than 800 HFS employees.

The Programs

In the eight years since the creation and implementation of the Unity Through Diversity training by the original

help HFS administrative staff understand how diversity can improve the company's bottom line when managed effectively and allowed participants to talk about power and privilege in ways that are unconventional and engaging.

A reenactment of a fable about a giraffe and an elephant that could not be friends unless one changed the other set the stage for an engaging conversation about diversity tension, job expectations and effectiveness. The bottom line: diversity creates tension, and effective leaders are those capable of using this tension to their advantage and without attempting to make individuals, especially those from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, fit a certain mold. In other words, valuing diversity means acknowledging and celebrating the individual aspects that make us who we are.

From the initial few who were invited to attend the first incarnation of the Building a House for Diversity training program grew an interest in bringing the "giraffe-elephant" concept to their peers, and the ProActors began taking their training on the road to other areas within the HFS division and eventually into other areas of the Purdue community. The program has grown into an engaging dialogue that includes multimedia clips, a game show format and the ever popular "giraffe-elephant" reenactment.

10 Lenses

Based on Mark A. Williams' book, *The 10 Lenses: Your Guide to Living and Working in a Multicultural World*, this program challenges participants to examine their own world view and the world views of those with whom they work. Ten Lenses is designed to help participants get to the core of the diversity discourse: a look inward to understand and challenge one's own deep-rooted



A group exercise in a ProActors-led diversity training class

assumptions and beliefs. Participants begin with a conversation about the “old diversity framework,” where the diversity discourse is limited to visible characteristics

learning meanings behind common names, placing particular emphasis on Spanish names. Additionally, this workshop provides basic computer knowledge to those looking for ways to take advantage of the various international features that can be found on personal computers.

Signs and Wonders

Through the lens of a young man, *Signs of Wonder: A Cross-Cultural Exercise in Communication*, takes the audience through a series of events that illustrates the frustration and confusion that people from other cultures often experience when they come in contact with ours. This exercise includes idioms, words, phrases and gestures that can be confusing and even offensive to someone experiencing U.S. culture from an “outsider” perspective. The overall objective of this exercise is to create awareness on cross-cultural communication, while exploring ways of better assisting people who find themselves transitioning into our culture.

When Worlds Collide

The ProActors' newest training program, *When Worlds Collide: Using the MBTI to Improve Retention, Engagement and Evaluation*, looks at how MBTI (Myers-

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such as race, gender, ethnicity and age. Once this frame of reference is established, participants begin to explore the contemporary and more complex diversity framework, one in which visual characteristics shape a person's identity but do not define it.

What's in a Name?

Misspelling or mispronouncing someone else's name can be frustrating and embarrassing for all parties involved. What's in a Name was designed with the intention of

Briggs Type Indicator) preferences can provide challenges in the workplace when ignored and provides participants with various tools that will help them better assess and develop individuals within their diverse teams.

The Players

The Diversity ProActors team is comprised of HFS employees who identify with one or more facets of the field of diversity but who are not diversity professionals themselves. With interests ranging from areas of

ability, sexual orientation and gender, to race, ethnicity, language and religion, the HFS ProActors are full-time staff members who volunteer their time for a period of two years to provide diversity training to their peers, colleagues and community members.

The ProActors group has included HFS staff from several departments, including university residences, Elliott Hall of Music, marketing, the conferences office, Purdue Memorial Union and the diversity resource office. The HFS human resources office plays a central role in coordinating the efforts of the ProActors, and five HFS HR staff members are lifetime members of the group.

The Audiences

Although the initial group of ProActors came together to develop and implement training that was designed to deliver a specific message to HFS staff, the group soon found itself invited to do presentations for new and different audiences, both on and off campus. On campus, the group makes its training available to other departments and divisions, as well as to student groups, faculty groups, leadership classes and various boards and committees. Over the years, the programs developed by the ProActors have impacted all 800 full-time HFS employees, as well as 197 resident advisors and student staff. In addition, nearly 700 people from other Purdue departments and divisions, including nearly 400 from Purdue's academic side of campus, as well as members of the Lafayette, Indiana, community, have participated in ProActors programming.

The ProActors' exposure to and collaboration with the Greater Lafayette community has allowed this group of dedicated volunteers to take an active role in making the community they call home a more open and welcoming environment. Some of the community groups the ProActors have presented to include the Greater Lafayette Realtors Association, the Tippecanoe County Sheriff's Department, a Leadership Lafayette class, a local bank, the West Lafayette Police Department, a group of volunteers from the local YWCA, the local chapter of the Association of Administrative Professionals, the Lafayette Diversity Summit and a local high school.

The ProActors team is careful to adapt its presentations to the needs of its diverse audiences rather than offering a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach to the trainings.

Accolades

For its ongoing commitment to diversity outreach efforts, the Diversity ProActors have been recognized both locally and nationally. The National Association for College Auxiliary Services in 2007 recognized the diversity efforts of the HFS division, including the contributions of the ProActors, as did CUPA-HR in 2011 with its SunGard Higher Education Innovation Award. In 2008, the HFS



A reenactment of a fable is part of the ProActors' Building a House for Diversity program

human resources and cultural programs office was invited to conduct a webinar to help others better understand how to develop and implement effective diversity programs at their organizations, with a lot of attention given to the work of the ProActors.

In 2009, the group received the Purdue University Catalyst Award, which recognizes Purdue programs for their best practices and for their willingness and ability to export those practices to other areas of the university community. In 2010, HFS's various diversity initiatives, including the work of the ProActors, were highlighted in an issue of Business and Legal Resources' *Best Practices in HR* newsletter. Most recently, the group was recognized by Purdue's executive vice president and treasurer's office for its volunteerism and contribution to the university.

Community Service by Any Other Name

Not all community service and outreach efforts look the same. Sure, what usually comes to mind when hearing these terms is volunteering at an animal shelter or picking up litter or reading to schoolchildren or serving a meal to the homeless. But outreach and service can take many different forms. The work of the HFS Diversity ProActors is one such example. The ProActors programming,

although not what one would typically envision as “community service,” has indeed very successfully served the community, both the Purdue community and the greater Lafayette, Indiana, community, for eight years now. Through its unique and innovative interactive training approach, this group of dedicated volunteers has found a way of engaging diverse audiences, both on the Purdue campus and outside of the institution, in meaningful and productive dialogue that promotes inclusiveness and respect, and it challenges individuals to be intentional in their efforts to build community.

Whether in trying to help Purdue employees do their jobs better and more effectively by learning to work as a team, or helping law enforcement officers think through pertinent topics such as racial profiling, or demonstrating the value and importance of cultural differences and awareness to high school and college students, the Diversity ProActors group has enjoyed the distinct privilege of helping to promote respect, inclusiveness and civility to vast and varied audiences. 

Promoting Unity Through Diversity

Purdue University’s housing and food services division’s diversity outreach efforts encompass much more than the ProActors program. The division employs a large number of individuals from underrepresented groups and makes it a priority to make these employees feel welcome and a part of the university community. With its Promoting Unity Through Diversity initiative, the office of the vice president for human resources – housing and food services (HFS) has developed diversity-related programs in the areas of recruitment, cultural awareness, leadership groups and retention.

In the area of recruitment, hiring practices were reevaluated, taking into consideration the university’s diversity efforts and other basic standards, to ensure that incoming employees were a good match for the organization; respecting diversity was incorporated into all job descriptions as a minimum requirement; and supervisors and recruiters began attending job fairs targeted toward underrepresented groups. In the area of cultural awareness, in addition to the formation of the ProActors, other initiatives include all new employees, regardless of title, being required to go through diversity training as part of their new employee orientation process and Spanish classes being offered to supervisors to assist them in connecting and communicating with their Spanish-speaking employees.

In the area of leadership, a Diversity Work Group was formed in order to assess HFS’s “culture” through student and staff surveys and to address the challenges facing the organization, and a Central Diversity Team was established in order to provide departments within HFS with more ownership over their diversity efforts. In the area of retention, the division made a conscious decision to incorporate respecting diversity as a core competency for all performance appraisals; a workplace English program was established to improve workplace communication so that employees whose first language was not English would be able to understand training programs and be eligible for promotions; a general citizenship and immigration-related program was implemented; and cultural nights are held throughout the academic year in an effort to bring greater awareness of the foods and traditions of the various underrepresented cultures that are part of the Purdue community.

As a result of the Promoting Unity Through Diversity initiative, a stronger sense of community was developed throughout Purdue’s HFS division, which in turn led to increased work satisfaction and improved performance among employees.

For its Promoting Unity Through Diversity initiative and related outreach efforts, Purdue’s office of the vice president for human resources – housing and food services (VPHR - HFS) division received CUPA-HR’s 2011 SunGard Higher Education Innovation Award. Thanks to the generous support of SunGard Higher Education, VPHR - HFS received a \$3,000 contribution to the endowment or scholarship of its choice.

