

Diversity Certificate Program at Texas A&M Places Emphasis on Experiential Learning

By Anne Mayer

Texas A&M University has long regarded diversity as a vital component of its culture and is committed to cultivating an environment characterized by inclusion, welcome and support of all groups. Texas A&M's commitment to diversity was further affirmed in a 2012 memorandum from President R. Bowen Loftin to the campus community stating that a top priority at the university is "to create an environment which supports diversity campus-wide and increases awareness of the globally connected world in which we live ... To help meet this priority, all university employees have the responsibility to create an environment in which individuals are treated with dignity and respect ..."

In order to assist the university in meeting this priority and in support of its diversity plan, HR employee and organizational development (EOD) created the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace certificate program. The purpose of the program is to contribute to a positive work climate by helping Texas A&M employees recognize, accept and value differences among coworkers and others in the community, thereby increasing their ability to work, serve and interact effectively with others within a diverse environment.

The program — which considers diversity from a holistic perspective that includes differences in gender, race, sexual orientation, political and religious viewpoints, age, cultural identity, ability and personal characteristics — introduces participants to the value of diversity and inclusion, raises awareness about their perspectives and how their actions impact others, and offers strategies for creating and maintaining a workplace that not only accepts but also values diversity.

A Multifaceted Approach to Diversity Training

The 18-month Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace certificate program blends online training and classroom workshops with a variety of experiential activities and independent assignments. Unique to the conventional methodology of employee training, the program, patterned after the concept of required courses, electives and a capstone, is akin to a degree plan and thus is a familiar



For its Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace certificate program, Texas A&M University's HR Employee and Organizational Development Team received a CUPA-HR 2014 HR Innovation Award. From left to right are team members Tami Overby, Jenny Smith, Anne Mayer and Jose Macias.

strategy for learning in higher education. Required courses include workshops and online training on fostering respect, interpersonal communication, cultural competence, ADA, effective hiring practices and more.

Requiring participants to take personal responsibility for learning beyond class attendance, they also must pursue outside activities that take them beyond their zones of familiarity. Each participant must earn at least four "elective credits" chosen from a variety of enrichment activities that provide real-life experiences in diverse environments and expand their understanding of diversity. By encouraging employees to participate in a variety of university and community events they likely had previously not considered, the program aims to foster lifelong engagement in inclusionary practices and learning.

Participants are also required to journal their insights following these experiential activities, allowing for critical examination and synthesis of their experiences. These experiences are then shared during the final capstone course, further capitalizing on their journey from day one of the program.

inclusion cultivates excellence

Creative, Cost-Effective Programming

Because EOD's budget prohibited the purchasing of vendor-provided curriculum or external training, it was necessary to get creative with the offerings. We found that many of our existing training and development workshops had diversity components that could be repackaged and augmented with new internally-developed online and classroom courses and resources. The program was also built upon the numerous and varied opportunities offered within the university and surrounding community, much of it available at no cost, to provide enriching experiential learning outside of the traditional classroom.

Examples include activities and programs offered through Texas A&M's disability services, office of international outreach, division of multicultural services, diversity office and African American Professional Association; lectures and seminars provided by visiting faculty on topics including social justice, religious tolerance and global understanding; and programs offered through community organizations such as the Turkish House, the Islamic Center and the African American Museum.

Program Objectives, Goals and Competencies

The goals of the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace certificate program are to heighten awareness of diversity and inclusion, build diversity-related skills and competencies, and clarify expectations and responsibilities of employees and managers to create and maintain a diverse and inclusive workplace. Competencies targeted by the program include accountability, adaptability, clear communication, service orientation, problem solving, collaboration and inclusion.

Upon completion of the program, participants should be able to: (1) assess how their own and others' cultural identity, filters and behaviors impact the work environment; (2) respond to bias in a proactive and transformational way; and (3) utilize strategies to bridge differences among, and work more effectively with, people who differ from one another according to a wide variety of attributes. The program seeks to not only raise skills and awareness, but also contribute to transformative change.

Since its pilot implementation in October 2012, 21 employees have earned certificates, and an additional 33 employees are currently enrolled in the program. Building on the program's initial success, EOD is expanding its promotional efforts and anticipates a surge of enrollments over the coming year.

Personal Reflection

Perhaps nothing speaks more to the success of the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace certificate program than the participants' own words. Following are excerpts from program participants' journals:

During Danny Glover's presentation at the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. breakfast, he frequently spoke about how his family impacted his life and instilled his values. That really reinforced to me the important role parents have in helping to shape their children's perspectives (good or bad) and that as parents, we should always be continually mindful of what seeds we plant.

What really hit home with me was how the framing of a given situation impacts the perception of that situation. In many cases we are not even aware that a skewed framing is occurring and we inadvertently perpetuate that framing and that interpretation of events. As an individual of the "power and privileged" class, it is sometimes hard for me to understand and relate to those of different classes. This session has helped to remind me to not look at situations strictly through the framework of my upbringing, but to step back and think critically and understand that how information is presented shapes the foundation of my interpretations, and that I need to continuously reevaluate with an open mind when new information or experiences come my way.

I went into this seminar thinking I would gain all these insights and understanding into other cultures, but what I didn't expect was that in order to do that, I have to understand my own personal culture and cultural perspective. That was a real eye-opener! I also learned that culture is abstract — what I see, others may see differently, and that's ok!

Attending this training left me hopeful and with a sense of peace. I am comfortable being more assertive than in the past in politely and respectfully challenging inappropriate conversations about sexual orientation and any other differences in individuals. I feel affirmed in my belief that our differences are what make us special and valuable. 

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