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The Deepening of Diversity: Lessons from Critical Moments

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"This educational model identifies critical moments in the educational experiences of non-traditional students, particularly nonwhite, first generation students. The moments are critical because the students perceive that their difference sets them apart."

This educational model identifies critical moments in the educational experiences of non-traditional students, particularly nonwhite, first generation students. The moments are critical because the students perceive that their difference sets them apart. Feeling silenced, inarticulate, and/ or misunderstood, they typically negotiate these critical moments in isolation. Such moments are also critical for the university or the college as the presence of cultural diversity on a predominantly White campus is diminished or distorted by student's silences.

Small group discussions of such moments allow diversity to become apparent and to be taken as important in the educational process. Further, when taught to small groups of students over time the discussions contribute to the development of important critical reasoning and social skills. The Critical Moments project aims to: (1) increase the contributions of culturally diverse students on college and university campuses; (2) to ease the isolation of traditionally underrepresented students; (3) to enable students to collaborate across cultures; and (4) to promote critical reasoning and empathetic understanding as students discuss issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender.

Presenters will share initial findings from post-then-pre Inventory of Critical Thinking-Dispositions and Attitudes which demonstrates increased cross cultural empathetic understanding and collaboration among students. Presenters will also demonstrate how Critical Moments Case Studies equip students with the tools necessary to build community and become successful students at a predominantly white university. These tools include:

- Problem solving: Attending to and defining the problem, non-judgmental brainstorming, considering alternatives through analysis of consequences, and determining goal(s).
- Interpersonal communication: Listening, responding with empathy, asserting one's views, sharing important and relevant life experiences, bringing others into the discussion, negotiating conflict and building consensus.
- Critical thinking: Using evidence from text to support one's opinion, understanding how relevant factors in problematic situations are understood tacitly as well as explicitly.
- Writing: Articulating key issues on succinct form, employing expressive,

analytical, and persuasive writing styles.

- Oral expression: Engaging in argument with confidence but also with respect for others and their viewpoints; building bridges between cultural groups; using shared knowledge, experience and values.

While the Critical Moments project is enacted in a variety of disciplines, we will focus on the First Year Freshman Seminar experience. The Critical Moments classroom provides students with an immediate community of co-learners to assist them in making the transition from high school to college.

Small group case discussions take place twice a week during the student's first semester. The cases are based on the experiences of the students of color who have successfully negotiated challenges such as difficult roommates, family financial stress, peer pressure, lack of voice and presence in the curriculum, insensitive professors, hyper-visibility and invisibility on campus and how to respond to campus racial incidents. Social skills and analytical thinking skills progress as each new case poses, multi-layered problems for the students to consider. Dynamics of race, class, and gender permeate the cases thus making it impossible for simplistic or prescriptive solutions to be found.

PRESENTERS:

Suzy Prenger is an instructional consultant specializing in Inclusive Teaching and Diversity issues for the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has taught multicultural education and for the last four years, has taught in the Nebraska's Freshman Foundations Program and has participated as a member of a multicultural team of case writers for the Critical Moments Diversity Case Studies Project. She has served as evaluator for a number of educational programs, most recently for Nebraska's Artist Diversity Residency Program. She is adjunct faculty in Spanish at Nebraska Wesleyan University and was academic director for the Cuernavaca, Mexico campus of the Center for Global Education-Ausgsburg College, an experiential education program committed to critical pedagogy.

Reshell Ray is the assistant director for Student Involvement at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is a certified diversity trainer and consultant. She specializes in the areas of team building, community development and racial reconciliation. Ray serves as the project director for Critical Moments. She teaches in the University Foundation Program and leads the Multi-cultural team which is responsible for interviewing students, case writing and training of faculty and staff who desire to utilize the methodology.