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Whose Voice?

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Abstract
This presentation suggests ways in which students of color can learn, through meaningful research experience, to place into proper context the "majority rules" of a predominantly white institution (University of Nebraska-Lincoln). This process will start with a grassroots experience in Haiti and will end with students incorporating that experience into the campus community.

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"Roch nan dlo pa konnen roch nan soley" which translates as the rock in the water does not understand the rock in the sun. In other words, a privileged person (the rock in the water) does not know or can not feel the poor person's reality (the rock in the sun) unless he gets out of the water and feels the full heat of the sun.

The purpose of this paper is to look at majority rules from a different perspective and relate it to university life and how students, primarily students of color, can use this to their advantage. In order to give the students a better understanding of majority rules and class privilege, I intend to take a small dedicated group of them to the Caribbean country of Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere and one of the poorest countries in the world. In order for students to pull their own reality into perspective there needs to be an awakening, there needs to be a questioning of the majority rules, what they mean and how to manipulate them. The most effective way I know of to facilitate that questioning is to take students outside of their comfort zone and place them into a situation where they, at least on one level, hold the privilege and where they operate from the position of "majority rules." While in Haiti the students will explore several things; they will see how Haitian villagers navigate the inequalities of their society and how they manage to work the system to their advantage, they will see and experience class privilege from a different perspective and they will working jointly with Haitians from the local community in hand-on field research to address self-identified village concerns.

In order to effect positive, long-lasting change in a community, it is paramount to understand the community and its many interrelated parts. For example, questions to ask include the following: What is the physical construction and layout of a family compound? What are the demographics of the village? What does the family unit consist of? What types of markets are available and what kind of market strategies are employed by the villagers? What types of work groups are present in the community and how do they function? Once these and other questions have been answered, it is then possible to begin to have an accurate understanding of a particular community. Then and only then is it possible to begin to develop applied programs/projects that will fit the specific needs of the community.

Having a working knowledge of this Haitian community and the roles fulfilled by the villagers consists in giving accurate and practical answers to the above questions. The recorded data can then be incorporated into the design, development, implementation and evaluation of the research projects.

The questions used in understanding the functioning of a Haitian village are the same types of questions students of color need to ask at a university like UNL. The process is the same; in order to understand the whole it is essential to understand the parts and how they fit together. Some of the questions that students might begin to ask are: How do we bridge the essential connections between people, ideas, experience and cultures that otherwise remain disconnected? How do we build diverse communities that are not insular but that serve as links sharing knowledge and experience? How do we engage in as much community building on campus and off campus? How do we encourage a circular movement of people and ideas up and down the chain of privilege (majority rules)? Just as it is the poor who can give the best insight into what poverty means and how it can be addressed, it is majority (however that is defined) who can give the best insight into their rules and how to address them. There are many paths to take to arrive at the awakening of the majority rules and how they function This is only one path.

Presenter
William T. Waters has worked for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the Office of Academic Support and Intercultural Services (OASIS) as a Program Coordinator for Intercultural Services since 2003. Dr. Waters has earned undergraduate and masters degrees from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a Ph.D. from Syracuse University in anthropology. He has spent considerable time over the last two decades working in a small rural village in southern Haiti conducting applied research with the equal partnership from area villagers in a variety of small-scale applied projects that are culturally sensitive, technologically appropriate and user friendly.