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# A Campus Responds: Improving the Climate for People of Color at a Small Liberal Arts Institution

**Traci Howard**
Nebraska Wesleyan University
**Kristi Rodriguez**
State Farm Insurance

**Five major themes will be suggested by panelists: problem identification is essential to change; the landscape determines the strategy; all constituencies must be involved; events influence the process; and there is no one best change arrangement.**

Changing institutional culture to eagerly embrace the values of diversity and inclusiveness requires much time, great amounts of human effort, and an intentional sense of vigilance to the enterprise. This is particularly true of a small, Midwestern, predominantly White liberal arts institution that is typified by homogeneity and traditional values. Through a panel presentation, a case study of how this process has begun at one such small predominantly White liberal arts institution in the Midwest will be described. Key players in the process, representing students, faculty, and staff, will suggest some of the major themes that have characterized what is now a five-year process to change institutional culture. The college is engaged in the slow process of change, but it has not yet achieved its vision. Through the stories that describe this institution's process, we hope to suggest ideas for other institutions to consider in engaging a change agenda making their campuses more inclusive and more welcoming for all persons, particularly for students of color.

Five major themes will be suggested by panelists. The first is that problem identification is essential to change. Ways in which this institution began to identify problems for students of color specifically and for the campus generally with respect to cultural pluralism will be presented. Both intentionally developed strategies, as well as ways that unplanned events can sometimes serendipitously provide problem identification, will be discussed.

The second theme is that the landscape determines the strategy. Theories of planned change suggest the essential nature of coherence between change strategies and the context within which they are being contemplated. In this case study, strategies that were successful because they had this coherence, including faculty / staff development, continuing conversation, and grass-roots efforts rather than administrative edicts, will be discussed.

The third theme is that all constituencies must be involved. Culture change only occurs if it is embraced by all parts of an organization. Panelists will suggest ways that students, faculty, staff at all levels, board members, and community resources were involved in change efforts. Successes will be shared.

The fourth theme is that events influence the process. How campuses respond to unplanned events that occur throughout a change process affects the success or failure of the change itself. Two critical incidents that influenced the entire campus as well as an audience beyond the campus will be highlighted, and the impact of these incidents on the process will be described.

The fifth theme is that there is no one best change agent. Reflection on the process of cultural change suggests those change agents whose actions influenced the outcome. In this case study, students played a significant role as change agents. This unfolding role of students in the change process will be examined.

Participants will hear about this change process that, while fraught with weaknesses, does appear to have had some degree of success in beginning to cause change in the institutional culture regarding awareness and appreciation of diversity. Panelists will discuss student responses to this culture change will make predictions for next steps in the change agenda.

## PRESENTERS

**Traci Howard** is Nebraska Wesleyan's Multicultural Student Adviser and Program Coordinator at Nebraska Wesleyan. Prior to her appointment to this position in 1996, she served during the 1995-1996 academic year as Admissions Counselor and Minority Student Adviser. Howard has a B.S. in social work from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and has served as a teaching counselor, social worker, and group leader in the Omaha area from 1990-1995.

**Kristi Rodriguez** is a staff member at State Farm Insurance in Lincoln, Neb. She completed her B.S. in communication studies from Nebraska Wesleyan in December 1996. While a student, Kristi was President of the Rainbow Club for two years, a member of the student activities board, and a student assistant in the office of Student Affairs.