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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Collin County Community College (Texas) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The college's action plan focused primarily upon integrating issues of American pluralism and identity into the core curriculum. The program's main goals included extending the debate beyond classroom boundaries by provoking students' critical though through a speaker series, self-examination, and assaying the question "what does it mean to be an American?" The program's activities included the following: establishing some common ground among faculty through discussions of common readings; creating two learning communities, one applying sociology to politics and another about identity, to help students recognize both the similarities and the differences among Americans; screening a film discussing racial prejudices among men to several hundred students in a Sociology course; facilitating student exploration of their own ethnicity through discussions; and hosting a speaker series along with a forum and photo exhibit on the issue of church burning to generate discussions concerning the concept of community. Obstacles faced by the project included some lack of interest, limited faculty participation due to previous commitments, and too much focus on differences rather than similarities. In spring 1997, three learning communities exploring America's communities will be implemented. (HAA)

Collin County Community College
Exploring America's Communities
Progress Report

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

COLLIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Collin County Community College, a three-campus district located in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, has grown since its inception (1986) serving 10,600 credit students (5474 FTEs) and 12,000 noncredit students. Two campuses serve suburban populations (82% student body). A third campus draws students (13%) from small towns and rural environments. Other sites serve another 5% of our student body. The female:male ratio is 58%:42%. Persons of color represent 17.27% of our student population (Hispanic 6.47%, Black 4.41%, Asian 5.51%, American Indian 0.87%).

Our Action Plan focused primarily upon integrating issues of American pluralism and identity into our core curriculum. We established some common ground with our faculty through small group discussions of some common readings. We also designed two learning communities to provide students with an in-depth opportunity to search for our commonalties as Americans while recognizing our different historical and cultural experiences. Our goals included extending the conversation outside classroom boundaries through a speakers' series capable of provoking students' critical thought, self-examination and response to the question "what does it mean to be an American?"

The vice president for instruction supported "Exploring America's Communities" as a major instructional theme which helped establish a receptive climate. Our Fall 1996 keynote speaker described and interpreted the implications of Texas' changing demographics for instruction at our meetings for our 400 part-time faculty. They also met in small groups to discuss readings to familiarize themselves with the issues and curricular implications of American pluralism and identity.

Full-time faculty, during their fall divisional meetings, also addressed readings through small group discussions facilitated by study questions designed by project team members. All faculty received an

extensive annotated reading and film list whose titles were available in our excellent library collections.

Several hundred students enrolled in Introduction to Sociology sections viewed Min Wah's film "The Color of Fear" chronicling a series of frank discussions of racism and prejudice among men of different racial and cultural backgrounds. The film was an excellent teaching tool calling attention to the "silent consciousness of white privilege." Many students were initially resistant to the messages about the subtle, insidious and often unconscious forms of racism and prejudice that are perpetuated by "God-fearing, good, decent folk."

Students began to acknowledge that while minorities must understand the "white experience" in order to succeed in society, the opposite is not true. Areas of similarity then became the subject of class discussions. Having students practice listening to "others" as a means of diminishing defensiveness enhanced classroom experiences . Students wrote from the point of view of a person of color in response to the film rather than whether they agreed or disagreed with the sentiments expressed by the film's discussants.

Sociology students wrestled with the question "what is your ethnicity?" Initially, many white students resisted the concept of ethnic identity by responding "I am an American" believing ethnicity was not a factor for their own identity. Exploration of their ethnic identities (often blended ethnicities) became the focus for some of their research. Students came to believe "American" had been too narrowly defined and began to show an intense appreciation of multicultural perspectives and experiences. As students explored their own ethnicities, some began to express a sense of pride in "having a place in history." Negative stereotyping diminished as students gained an appreciation of the multicultural origins of many traditions, rituals and customs.

"The Tale of the Adventurous Ant," a parable, stimulated student reflection upon the limiting consequences of ethnocentricity. Read as a concluding activity in the semester, students synthesized much

of their recently acquired multicultural perspectives in their essays. Recognizing that while exploration of cultures other than their own could be "unsettling" and might "challenge their preconceived ideas of the world," most students preferred this to a monocentric view of society.

Many of the American history sections integrated the conversation throughout their survey course. One faculty member, teaching 200 students in 5 sections, used the concept of community as the catalyst for the introduction and conclusion of each course unit. Classes discussed, for example, the Native-American concept of community and then compared it with the European concept of community (kinship vs. nation-state). Conversations in class examined the rhetoric of democracy and the evolution of terms such as equality, the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Lively discussion ensued in response to David Potter's article "The Civil War in the History of the Modern World" as students explored the balance between order vs. liberty and of nationalism vs. liberalism.

Many of the conversations in our courses (history, rhetoric, sociology, humanities, literature and ESL) were responses by students to our speaker series. Writer and storyteller Greg Howard of the Cherokee Nation spoke about the "first Americans" to more than 75 students while Ron Cowart, director of Refugee Affairs Office in Dallas, discussed the growing presence of Asian-American communities in our region. Eddie Stimpson, the son of a North Texas sharecropper and author of My Remembers, described the Jim Crow America of his youth while June Van Cleef, Professor of Photography, explored the disappearing rural communities of Texas.

Over 200 students, faculty and staff attended a forum on the issue of church burnings ("Crisis and Community") sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Honors Program in which six community representatives from Greenville, Texas presented a two-hour panel discussion on the causes, reactions and solutions these events. This forum and photo exhibits recording our changing landscape challenged students to identify shared American values and identify cultural elements common to all people.

Anchoring the project's instructional efforts were two fall semester learning communities. The Road to the White House explored America's communities by applying sociology to politics. Students studied race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, region and religion as factors contributing to our views of the political environment, candidates and national issues.

The learning community Rhetoric and the Republic was designed around a four-part project: Who Am I, Who Is The Other, What is a Community and finally What is My Community. Integrating our speakers' series into coursework, the class also went on a "City as a Classroom" field trip, exploring white and black communities in the city of Plano. The faculty team infused the course with the theme of America's communities. Whether discussing the post Civil War freedmen's community or the Southern communities of the Civil rights era, they wove the elements of differences and commonalities into the fabric of history and language use of each movement. The final course project solicited a thoughtful, researched response from students' probing their own private and public communities.

Some colleagues and students expressed a lack of interest in the questions posed by the project. Faculty were sometimes defensive, perhaps viewing the project as an exercise in "political correctness." Some students had to work through their defensiveness to acknowledge that prejudice was not just "in someone else's head" but was part of our community and national experiences. Intense reflective thinking is not an attribute of many first-semester first-time college students.

Heavy course schedules and commitment to college-wide task forces limited the ability of some faculty to participate in our forums. We were unable to interest more than 3 faculty in a proposed monthly reading group and abandoned that plan. Our team implemented so many opportunities to explore America's communities that we had some difficulty in trying to support our colleagues. In another vein, the national focus seemed to emphasize differences among Americans rather than a search for commonalities. Even the speakers at our regional conference invoked these differences and we returned to our campus without a

methodology to identify what Americans have in common. The short duration of our planning efforts and our head-long immersion into implementation was a function of the NEH timeline for this grant. This left us breathless and often unable to follow through with more measured conversations.

During the Spring 1997 semester, we will implement three learning communities which will each explore America's communities from the perspectives of four disciplines (history, rhetoric, sociology and political science). Several of our speakers will return to campus and we have received a number of suggestions from faculty for additional ones. Many faculty expressed continued support and will continue to infuse perspectives of pluralism in their courses. We will begin our oral history project in which students will interview and record narratives of county residents. We will share the outcomes of our classroom conversations with our colleagues which, we hope, will promote continued conversations among faculty, and students.

What have we learned from our students conversations? Students identified freedom, individualism and opportunity as defining American characteristics. Many students saw America as a place to become and to have possibilities. Dividing us was race, religion and money. The more reflective students identified racial, ethnic and religious differences as separating us. Students noted that tradition and crisis were elements which bring us together. In times of crisis, we support each other regardless of divisions. We share the Constitution, voting, freedom of speech, love of family and service to community. Some students identified a common need for a higher power and beliefs to explain creation. They saw our commonalities as love of freedom, a chance to better ourselves and an ability to be an individual.

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