

Designing Intercultural and Cross-cultural Spaces

By Isabel Nazario, associate vice president, academic and public partnerships in the arts and humanities, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick

AT RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY, THE EFFORT TO STRENGTHEN DIVERSITY HAS BEEN ONGOING. IT HAS BEEN A FLUID PROCESS, INFUSING A DIALOGIC MODEL FOR ENGAGING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND LINKING COCURRICULAR STUDENT ACTIVITIES WITH ACADEMIC LEARNING. OVER THE YEARS, AS KNOWLEDGE OF DIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIP BROADENED AND AWARENESS OF THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC BENEFITS OF HAVING A DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT INCREASED, RUTGERS BEGAN TO EXPERIMENT WITH STRATEGIES TO CREATE A MORE “INTEGRATIVE” APPROACH.

In 2000, a task force of the university-wide Committee to Advance Our Common Purposes reported that, while Rutgers had made progress in increasing students' knowledge of global cultures, more work was needed to deepen intercultural understanding and appreciation. Two years later, Rutgers organized a steering committee to implement a new multicampus project funded by a grant from the Bildner Family Foundation. This project's goal was to “infuse diversity and intercultural competency into the curriculum and make comprehensive connections among courses and cocurricular learning-based programs.”

Through the new initiative, Rutgers made great strides in providing students with skills and experiences critical to achieving understanding across differences and creating a context for cultural pluralism. By the end of the grant, a network of fifty-two faculty fellows from New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark had been awarded research grants. Together they participated in faculty development and assessment workshops and worked with student affairs staff to develop programs.

To attain buy-in for diversity across campuses, Rutgers formed broad-based steering committees consisting of vice presidents, deans of faculty, department chairs, faculty members, directors of cultural centers, and student life and professional staff. Individuals in these committees worked in teams to produce thematic programs that connected ideas encountered in the classroom with activities taking place on campus. This strategy enabled Rutgers to achieve a higher level of



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institutional support for diversity while enhancing the micro-level efforts already in place. The Bildner initiative created opportunities for students to seamlessly connect theory with practice, an approach that proved highly successful in engaging student leaders, counselors, alumni, and faculty in a collaborative process of learning.

In assessing the Bildner programs, we found that units in the university that historically had not worked together were now sharing ideas, arguing, and developing consensus. Interrelations across units and divisions in turn fostered critical opportunities to deepen intercultural knowledge. Rutgers produced programs with excellent content that had very high attendance primarily because staff at all levels were concretely involved and supportive. In the words of a student leader, “we created a buzz” for these new learning activities. It was understood that everyone, including staff and students, could be instructors in the process.

Through the activities and courses we jointly designed, students embraced new definitions of historical research rooted in lived experience. They likewise explored alternative means of “publishing,” such as classes that focused on conducting and sharing oral histories that were adapted into multimedia performance. Profoundly changed by their participation, they began to actively and personally partake in their own education rather than remain passive recipients of knowledge. As they became empathetic advocates of the people behind the stories they gathered and told, the classroom was transformed into a space of intercultural and cross-cultural engagement. Through the newly established interrelationships between student and academic affairs, both faculty and staff provided new space for themselves to experience and learn from similar cultural encounters. ■