

## Fostering Interracial Friendships on Campus: Taking it Up a Level

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There is probably little doubt we can all agree the amount of questions we receive during orientation/welcome week can be overwhelming at times. Even though our main purpose is to answer the questions of our new students and parents, the long list of questions typically asked of us leave our thoughts - most of the time - without much more consideration and just as quickly as they were asked. Conversely, the summer of 2005 was a little different for me. For the first time in my 25+ years associated with higher education, I had a parent ask a question that lingered with me long after orientation was over. As the Chief Student Affairs Officer for our campus, my welcoming talk to our parents entitled “How to be a Cougar Parent” rarely elicited deep challenging questions. Yet, this one starry-eyed and appropriately nervous mother from Washington, D.C. shook my foundation when she asked me, “What is it that the College of Charleston is doing to foster increased interracial friendships among your students on campus?” Of course, my “orientation rhetoric” went into overdrive, and I began to talk about all of our diversity efforts, the Multicultural Center, programming, etc. She stopped me quickly during this regurgitation of the often used facts and stated, “I know about all of that, but what is it that you all are *actively* doing to put people together of various races. I know all about the buildings, programs, and all the rest. But, how often are you encouraging students of different races to interact together in meaningful and long-term friendships?”

It was at that point I really began to hear what she was asking me, and her question stuck with me for quite some time. It was apparent to me my initial uncomfortable feelings were rooted in the fact I could not give her an answer. Eventually, it hit me that the mother’s point was evidently clear: we all have the cultural “Centers” on our campus; we put forth the diversity recruitment efforts; we create the various programs; and the list goes on. Yet, is it really valid that we might not *intentionally* and *actively* assist our students to create the interracial friendships we often dream about for them and strive to see? As higher education professionals, who would be better on our campuses to start this entire process of changing our institutions by *actively* putting students representing various races together with each other? In essence, ask yourself the same question I finally asked of myself. That is, “**when is the last time I made an intentional effort to put students together of varying races?**” Almost every one of us can claim we look to maintain certain representations of student diversity as well as stress the importance of having these students as a part of our staffs, programs, organizations, etc. However, the real and bigger question centers around one deeper and more probing issue: **Do we, once we have these wonderfully diverse student groupings, foster long-lasting interracial friendships among them after their association with each other is over?**

Taking this idea outside of the students we are directly working with, how often are we creating the same kind of relationships among other students on campus? Even

more of a personal challenge, how are we in our own lives modeling these friendships for our students? In essence, are we walking the walk regarding our personal interracial friendships because students closely watch our *actions* more than they hear our words? I have often been asked to do Diversity/Multicultural Consulting. One of the strongest points I try to make is diversity is not about just saying comfortably, “I love everybody and I am open to everyone,” but it is more about putting words into *action*. Stepping out. Taking risks. Creating the world we see in our visions. There is no question our commitment has been strong, but there really needs to be more. Our campuses are the greatest “student learning laboratories” on the face of the earth, and we are in a unique and wonderful position to teach so many lessons to our students through *action*. This is not to say that we should force anyone to do anything. Obviously, that would not benefit any of us. Yet, we are distinctive in the role we play on campus. This is why we - and us alone - can be the first to create through our programs the much-desired special campus environment that will most assuredly and symbolically scream to all within earshot, “this place is serious about diversity and/or race relations.”

To share a more personal example, I often notice how little African-American and White men interact. It is my belief (and maybe mine alone) so many of our racial problems through the years would have been less of an issue if these men had taken time to dialog with each other by ignoring the fears that have, for the most part, kept them apart. I will admit there are increased numbers of these friendships today, but take a look around you. Many of our students work together within a particular club, team, or other group. Once done with their duties, they go their separate ways. Thus, after looking around closely, I still do not see the deep, rich, open, and supportive friendships between African-American and White men that are witnessed within most monocultural friendships. Reflecting back on that mother’s initial question and challenge to me, if this is such a passion of mine, why have I not taken the time to use what little power I have on this campus to bring these men together for nothing more than simple interaction if that is all that comes out of it? Maybe it is time for me to add to my personal diversity efforts by *actively* putting these men together. The funny part of this is sometimes in life our biggest challenges to personal growth come from the most obscure and unexpected places!

On many occasions, I am frequently known to tell my staff it is “time to take it up a notch to the next level” when we are discussing our work with and for our students because they always deserve better. On the other hand, am I taking it up to the next level in my desire to see more interracial friendships on my campus? Are you? I’m not sure of all the answers, but I do feel that most of us probably could be more *intentional* in bringing our diverse students together.

For those of you fostering these types of friendships on campus or for those finding yourself in this type of relationship, thank you and keep it up. But, I know as for me, I need to foster more of these friendships right here in my own back yard. In other words, I need to heed my own advice and “take it up a level.” My students and our world deserve no less.