UMDLI

University of Maine
Diversity Leadership Institute

Opening Doors, Minds, and Hearts

Diversity Reflections

2010
Stephen Allan
An appreciation of diversity must come from within. The more comfortable we are with ourselves, the more we understand ourselves, the better we are in accepting different ideas. I believe a majority of those who do not, cannot or will not celebrate, or even tolerate diversity, feel threatened about their own stature and the stature of whichever groups they identify with. Social justice is seen by many as an encroachment on their self-definition and where they are in the world. It is out of fear (combined with ignorance, bigotry and lack of imagination) that they shun diversity. These are the people who refuse to question perception. They cling to the familiar and dismiss anyone who challenges it. Unfortunately, the people who hold these attitudes are in privileged groups, and because of these groups’ statures, they tend to control the social agenda.

Change in perception and acceptance does not occur suddenly. It must develop organically through the individual, and that individual must come to terms of who they are and where they are in this world, or at least striving to achieve those goals. An appreciation of diversity must come from within. People must be comfortable with challenging their own ideas, see the possibility that they may be wrong or ignorant about a subject and willing to listen to different voices and contemplate their validity.

But those efforts cannot stop with an individual’s internal enlightenment. In order for diversity to triumph, action is still needed. This does not necessarily mean drastic demonstrations or radical activity (though those methods have been crucial in the past), it could mean something as simple as respecting someone who is different than they are and treating them as equals.

Fighting against thousands of years of inertia to achieve diversity is not easy. If you go up against the status quo, will you triumph? No, you’ll probably get your butt kicked. But you must get back on your feet and continue the fight… and get your butt kicked. It is simply a process of finding yourself beat up time and time again; but this effort is not failure. In fact, while the attitudes and inertia my continually beat you into a pulp, the sheer fact that you get back on your feet means you are winning, if just in increments. Basically you’re reliving the end of the first Rocky movie (spoiler alert) where Stallone loses to Apollo Creed, but was winning the point? Sure, the world would be better if we could fast forward to the end of Rocky IV where Stallone seemingly defeats the entire Soviet Union in 15 rounds and wins the Cold War in the process. But before we head to the Siberian wilderness to put our bodies through some grueling, superhuman training montage you have to realize that a celebration of diversity is a long-term effort. Attitudes and false beliefs are stronger than the best-prepared army (or Mr. T and Ivan Draco combined). They hold steady and outlast years of effort. But our continued endeavors do chip away at those beliefs, at the social and personal level. Every generation progresses forward with more diverse ideals than the generation before it. We have come a long way, but we have a long way still to go.
Shelly Chasse-Johndro
The University of Maine Diversity Leadership Institute’s mission is to “provide and cultivate opportunities to understand, appreciate, support and strengthen the diversity of our community.” In my opinion this mission is worthy of respect, dignity and pride.

As a member of UMDLI, my goal is to advocate for multicultural education within Project Opportunity’s course, the University, and the greater community. The monthly meetings produced wonderful topics for discussion, which I try to incorporate into my teaching. Within the discussions, members share resources and each individual contributes their worthy of knowledge. I feel the members of this group played a very important role of educating each other and learning for one another. It is wonderful to be part of a group of courage individuals, who work in a predominately white institute, who generated many thought provoking issues. For me, the thoughts and questions that the UMDLI members have provoked in meetings will last a lifetime.

Sara Henry
UMDLI has been an amazing experience. I'd like to thank Alan Parks, Director of College Success Programs, for supporting my desire to participate in this terrific institute.

During the past 2 years I’ve stretched and grown personally and professionally. I believe that my worldview has changed and I see through eyes that more realistically perceive the people and events around me. Attending NCORE was an important kick off to my experience. Time and time again I’ve mentally returned to the preconference institute I attended. I find myself browsing through the notes I took 2 years ago, trying to remember what I learned about privilege from Victor Lewis, Peggy McIntosh, Mike Benitez Jr. and Hugo Vasquez.

Recently when I traveled out of state a companion made an inappropriate comment about 2 women of color. I could tell that others were upset also, but reluctant to speak to the offender. It reminded me how easy it is to bury our uneasiness in silence. Keep your head down, fly under the radar, and things will go smoother. UMDLI helped me gain the courage and confidence that enabled me to step forward and speak to the person, and call the individual on the racist statements made.

Exploring diversity with a group of colleagues during the monthly sessions has been an important part of the learning process. Transformation is disconcerting and stirs emotions like discomfort, shame, and sadness. Sharing and discussing privilege issues in a safe space, where I could wrestle with these feelings, has been a crucial aspect of my growth. The tone of the monthly sessions is positive, filled with compassion, openness and a generous sprinkling of laughter. I thank Devon Storman for leadership, and ability to shape UMDLI into an important UMaine organization that will have a positive impact on our community for many years to come.
Debra Kantor
While I grew up in Maine, I dropped out of high school and moved to the New York/New Jersey area at 17 where I lived for 33 years until I returned to Maine four years ago. As a 17 year old in Manhattan, I was astonished at the human diversity I saw, and heard. But I was also astonished at the museums, the libraries, and the entertainment—the various racial and ethnic groups did not impress me any more than going into a club at 2 am to see a show with New York’s night life and emerging to daylight and the early risers with their New York Times or other daily newspapers tucked under their arms.

When I finally went to college, at Rutgers University in Newark, I was again observing a variety of racial and ethnic groups, but nothing could have astonished me more than to find myself on a college campus. I just thought that was what college was. It was while I was a member of UMDLI that I learned that Rutgers-Newark is the most diverse university in the country. And yes, when I returned to Maine, I was struck by the whiteness of my town, and the University of Maine campus, but that was New Jersey and this was Maine, and I didn’t really expect them to look the same.

However, in my two years as part of UMDLI, I have thought more about diversity than I have in my many adult years. While our UMDLI discussions were often about how whiteness, for example, was so built into many of our assumptions that it was “invisible,” I realized that diversity is sometimes also invisible. I realized that the community in New Jersey where I had my home, and that I would have defined by its social class (working class), was as diverse a place as one is likely to find. However, the Indian family across the street were remarkable, not because of being Indian, but because they had a large ceramic pig on their lawn (their grandmother kept getting lost because all the houses in our community looked the same). I could give similar examples for all my neighbors.

And these conversations made me wonder what was invisible about the diversity of Maine. How often do we define ourselves as the one of the whitest state, and I live in Somerset County, one of the whitest counties. I was at a community economic development meeting when the speaker was trying to make the various service providers present aware that when the tourists stopped to eat, and saw the cashier wearing a t-shirt that said *If it’s tourist season, why can’t you just shoot them,* it didn’t make them feel welcome. I had seen the t-shirts before, and had even chuckled. It was one of those *aha* moments—was it ever funny to joke about “shooting” any group of people? It’s common to joke about tourists—and all those people from “away.” We know they benefit our economy, but in general we wish they would just mail us their money and not bother us with their loud talking, terrible driving—and just annoying us.

This committee, and the many others involved in diversity work, focuses on social divisions to make sure that our programs are serving everyone in our communities. However, others use diversity to create barriers—it is those others who are the problem. The problem *others* change over time: immigrants of every nation, socialist, red states, blue states, people who don’t believe in god and guns. I truly believe that it is important to *own* our history and how it influences who we are, and how we see the world. Acknowledging the differences in our experiences, however, shouldn’t keep us from recognizing that there is much more diversity *within* groups than *between* them.
John R. Kidder
My maternal grandfather, Harry Johnson, a man of few words, but much wisdom, always told me when I was a child that time goes much faster as you get older. I didn’t believe him then, but I do now.

It seems just yesterday that five colleagues that I barely knew and I stepped onto an airplane headed to NCORE in Orlando. I had a sense that at this conference new information and concepts would challenge, change, and forever alter my worldview. In retrospect, those notions were naïve. When the plane door closed and the massive metal bird lifted into the sky, a literal and figurative journey began in me that has led me to a current state of limbo. I can never return to the ignorant bliss of my white privilege blindness to issues of social justice and diversity, nor would I want to. I now find myself living somewhere between my old self and new self. I’m restless and not feeling quite comfortable in either space. I thought the work of examining these issues while examining myself would become easier as time progressed. I now know why people refer to this as hard work. I can never get to a place of contentment in thinking that the work is done. There is still so much work to be done both to continue my internal transformation and to be the change that I seek in the world and others. It’s hard to be a role model when you’re still sorting the role out for yourself. In this case, I’ve come to realize that restlessness is a good thing because it spurs me on to further discovery.

Can one person really make a difference? How can one find enough time in the 525,600 minutes allotted to each of us in a year to make an important and lasting difference in the lives of others by planting the seeds of change? Can I find words that will truly resonate with the person with whom I am speaking and cause them to deconstruct and analyze their point of view? I now understand that each ticking minute not only represents a decision to make but also presents an opportunity to take. Will I muster the courage to act regardless of what other might think, feel, or how they will judge me or will I always regret that I did not take action? The decision to be made is obvious regardless of the challenges involved. Nothing that is worthwhile to accomplish is ever easy.

It strikes me that we are happy and comfortable to always be encased in something—our houses, our cars, parking garages, office cubicles—that separates us from others and gives us excuses and physical barriers in not reaching out to care and demonstrate concerned action. I have been thinking about this as I watch my children constantly texting their friends and how I rarely pick up the phone to chat with friends and colleagues—instead I send e-mail. These impersonal modes of communication seem neither to be significantly more efficient modes of communication nor increase the time available in our day to do important things. Technology in many ways divides us instead of uniting us. Isn’t one of the most powerful instruments for good that we possess, besides our hands and our heart, the power of our voices. Our voices can speak out against injustice, impart a different way of looking at a situation, advocate for change, laugh, sing, or comfort a family member, a friend, or a total stranger. A prime example of this concept of encasement happened recently when my wife, Karen, and I boarded a mass transit vehicle called the Metromover—a kind of monorail or bus on an elevated concrete track—on a beautiful sunny day in Miami prior to our embarkation on a cruise ship. As the vehicle headed down the tracks, we talked to each other excitedly and marveled at the spectacular skyscrapers framed in stark contrast against the vibrant blue sky. However, when we looked to our right out the windows of the vehicle we saw in excess of 200 homeless people who made the streets of a deserted neighborhood of vacant lots their home. Guilt overwhelmed the two of us and we sat in silence for quite a while. Here we were about to head out on a glittering, highly polished cruise
ship where enough food is wasted in one day to feed many homeless people and these people were struggling to survive. Damn, we were part of the problem, not the solution. Live simply so that others might simply live. The words of “America the Beautiful” stung within me. When will our alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears and more importantly what can we individually and collectively do to make that a reality? Let’s all be conscious of our choices and the impact of those choices on others.

I hope that through this reflection you truly get a sense of the transformative power of NCORE and UMDLI. I will never view anything as I have in the past. The work is hard, arduous in fact, but it must be done. As for me, I’m going to, in Phyllis Brazee’s words “flink”—feel and think, continue to study and read in the areas of white privilege, social justice, and diversity, and share ideas and learn from my wonderful Orlando colleagues and other UMDLI Active Alums to gain collective wisdom on these issues. More importantly, I’m going to look for ways to roll up my sleeves and get busy making a difference, because I’ve squandered way too many of the 525,600 minutes that God graciously gives me each year to do this work. Will I make mistakes? Of course I will! Would I rather make mistakes and learn from them than not take action? Absolutely!

Sincere and heartfelt thanks for this singular NCORE and UMDLI experience to Dean White, Devon Storman, Regina Marquis, and both the Offices of Equal Opportunity and Cooperative Extension for funding this remarkable program. I would be extremely remiss not to thank Catherine Pease, who encouraged me in pursing this endeavor and who in concert with Steven Weinberger wholeheartedly supported my full participation in this program. Last but never least, thanks to the Mickey Mouse Crew or Crew Orlando—Valerie, Shelly, Sara, Steve, and Deb— for your friendship. I can’t envision a better group with whom to make this journey!

Carey Nason
Since being with the UMDLI, I think about diversity more broadly. I think more about what my role is in promoting diversity, not only at the University, but also in my personal life and community. I’ve made a conscious effort to attend and participate in events and access materials that will challenge me and help me broaden my perspective. I think of myself as an “aware” individual, but as Dr. Nieto said, we have to do more than just be aware. I now consider what I bring to the conversation and how I can contribute to a positive climate, and not just a positive climate for a select few or for select groups. I have greatly enjoyed my time this year with the UMDLI. I appreciate being able to work with such a dynamic intersection of University employees. I am challenged to think outside of my comfort zone. I am challenged to not just accept the status quo. I am challenged to continue my personal and professional growth and understanding.

Kristy L. Ouellette
When I applied to be a part of UMDLI, I did so with the hope that my thoughts and program processes would be challenged and informed. Now completing year one of the program, I am able to say the experience has surpassed any expectations that I had. NCORE was the perfect introduction of how difficult, yet rewarding this experience would be. The monthly meetings proved to be a wonderful cohort of individuals who all have the same goal in mind: leaning. Learning with one another and from one another our reflections, discussions and challenges were brought to life each time we came together.
Understanding diversity issues is critical competency that all educators need to possess. This experience has given me a variety of tools to use in my work with children, youth and families. I work with multiple populations of individuals daily, from Somali youth to incarcerated parents. Even in Maine, there is diversity across our state, and it is critical to access these underserved and underrepresented populations and provide them with quality educational experiences. Through UMDLI, I became much more aware of the injustices that people of color are facing and have faced for decades. Privilege surrounds us, major decisions in our state are those made by those with power and privilege.

As I continue to learn and grow through my experiences with UMDLI, I look forward to increasing my self-awareness and diversity awareness. My personal goal is to continue to have successful working relationships with individuals from many diverse backgrounds. Education is a common thread, and providing access to educational programs in communities where people live and work is critical to this Universities land grant mission.

Kenda Scheele
This was somewhat difficult for me to write because I have not fully formulated all my thoughts about my first year of UMDLI but I think I have enough to write some of my thoughts, ideas and reflections.

First, it was hard to know what to expect of the NCORE Conference. Part of this I’m sure stems from my missing the orientation (I was on vacation at that time). The sessions were good and the experience was very positive. Second, the discussions and sessions during the year were thought provoking in many ways to me. I had to fight my reactive defensive response often to hear what the people in the movie or in the book were saying. It was often hard to hear what they were saying. I’m hoping that I have been at least sensitized to the issues we discussed and at best have begun to change my own opinions and thinking. Appreciating diversity or difference, defining those terms as broadly as possible, is only part of the goal I have of my participation in UMDLI. I really want to live it more completely every day, to have it infuse my thoughts and actions naturally. I partway there but have a long way to go.
I found the discussions to be the most beneficial part of my UMDLI experience so far. I hope a strategy to involve more men in the program is forthcoming. I really believe a good gender mix makes for more productive and compelling discussions.

A very important reason for this program in my opinion is the plight of so many of our students of color. If we take the rates of completion for African-American college students in the United States they remain lower than their white counterparts. Research shows that by a large margin, the University of Virginia at 86% has the highest black student graduation rate of any state-chartered institution in the nation. The next-highest rate at a flagship state university is at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of New Hampshire, both are at 70%. Eleven other states have flagship universities that post a black student graduation rate of 60 percent or higher. These are the state universities in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Delaware, Florida, Michigan, New York, Connecticut, Georgia, Texas, Illinois, and New Jersey. Note that Maine is nowhere to be found! The states at the lower end of the graduation rate scale, standing at 33% are Alaska, Arkansas, South Dakota, Utah, and Nebraska. The University of Maine has a graduation rate of 39% for its African-American students.

Black enrollments in higher education are at an all-time high, but nationwide the black student college graduation rate remains dismally low, at an overall level of about 45%. Researchers identify several
reasons for this including: the racial climate at some colleges and universities can affect black persistence and graduation rates; many black students come from families that have no tradition of higher education, they lack the necessary support, role models, mentors and understanding for nurturing success in higher education. For me, making UMaine a welcoming, supportive and challenging place for ALL students to succeed is the best reason to make UMDLI the best it can be. I would like to see us follow through on at least one suggestion that was made this year: offering a program/event for the entire campus related to diversity, inclusion and/or tolerance.

Valerie Smith
At the close of my second year in UMDLI, I am struck by how the status of the world, nation, state, and University, related to diversity, have changed around me- and how much these things have not changed. I, too have changed- and not changed-during this time.

How has the world/nation/state changed in the past two years?
First on my list in order of impact: our scary former president is finally gone...Almost immediately, it seems that the USA’s reputation with the rest of the people on the planet improved, and some policies change, some dialogues begin with power-brokers in other countries. International cooperative work is once again on the list. We’re blowing off the dust and greasing the wheels.

Parts of our world seems to be developing a Muslim phobia. Banning head scarves in France, minarets in Switzerland, people being terrorized on subways in Europe, and our own homegrown examples (i.e. bombing mosques) seem to be indicators of a dangerous essentializing and marginalizing of those practicing the Muslim faith by those not practicing the Muslim faith. Holy wars scare me.

As alluded to previously, we have a new president. With his election, many folks believe we are at last living in a post-racial society. Conversely, many other folks believe the -isms are alive and well. To me, the fact that he is touted as Our First Black President indicates that we’re still firmly in our racialized society. Otherwise, he would be our first smart, somewhat ethical president in a long while... but not our first black president. I’d point out that the guy is actually bi-racial, but that’s an equally racialized, and irrelevant, observation. Backlash by our own home-grown fearmongers seems to be moving the Center even more to the right, and xenophobia is becoming fashionable-carding suspected “illegals” in Arizona, a political candidate in who, if elected governor, will insist that driver’s tests be given only in English, since “that’s what we speak in Alabama”... Maine law to give all consenting couples of marrying age full civil rights was repealed, funded in large part by organizations from out of state as well as the Catholic diocese. I wonder that the higher one climbs in political visibility, the more ridiculous one’s behavior is permitted to be. After all, we wouldn’t allow this sort of behavior on the playground, would we? I sure did not!

What is my perception the status of diversity on campus?
I do see a much larger variety of faces and bodies on campus than I did 15 years ago. It is no longer an accepted joke that students with dark skin are all athletes. Bill Picard is not the Lone Wheeler. Honestly, though, I am not sure what else has changed in
terms of diversity during the past two short years, other than my awareness of the
variety of resources scattered about campus. There are still a variety of diversity-related
initiatives, groups, committees, and sub-committees scattered around campus. Two
years ago I was mystified by the variety, locations, and isolation of the groups on which
I stumbled. Today I am mystified that we still have a jumble of initiatives, but no actual
unified diversity plan, strategic vision and approach, or coordinated effort to address
issues of diversity and global citizenship on campus. I think we all have work to do.
Together.

How have I changed, and not changed?
Membership in UMDLI will continue to be a valuable part of my own global citizen
education. The structure of the Institute (large, perception-challenging initial
experience, regular, ongoing dialogue over time with a small trusted community of
peers) mirrors what I know about effective ways to impact changes in thinking. From
UMDLI experiences, I have developed a clearer, more complex understanding of white
privilege. I gained a cohort of interesting, invaluable colleagues who come from
disparate parts of the U community, and with whom I can talk about issues and ideas. I
have a better sense of how and where to look for resource people on campus,
especially in my underlying desire to bring together some sort of coalition of like-
mined people, organizations, committees.

My desire to be part of a unified coalition, to have access to a unified resource
collection on the topic has not changed. Nor has my desire to push beyond talking
about diversity in terms of race, or to allude to systemic inequalities without having a
complex, tangible understanding of and ability to identify and work to change these
inequalities. (My predisposition toward convoluted sentences hasn’t changed, either.
Sorry about that). I still feel the need to engage in some sort of action, with like-
mined people, to impact change beyond my own thinking and immediate work and
social environments. I want to identify and address systemic inequalities, raise the
visibility of disability in the diversity vision, and continue the momentum begun during
my time at UMDLI. There are a great number and variety of insightful, well-
informed individuals in the University and local communities who are doing good work, and I
would like to get involved to a greater degree in these initiatives. While this reflection
has moved from the global to the particular (that would be me), UMDLI has been
invaluable in helping me work with the particular (that would also be me) in order to be
more effective at addressing the broader, then global, challenges.

Sue McCullough
The State of Diversity at the University of Maine Hutchinson Center
Located on Penobscot Bay in the mid-coast Maine town of Belfast, the Hutchinson Center is
reflective of the region in which it resides. Through our doors come high school students and
those just beginning their college journey, typically called “traditional” college students in the
18-24 year range. A growing number of these students are taking a full load of classes at the
Hutchinson Center obtaining their general education requirements and living at home to save
money.
More often the student coming through the door is a “non-traditional” student, over the age of 24 with family and work responsibilities in addition to their college course work. They stopped out of college or never had a chance to begin and are now seeking to fulfill their dreams. With a Senior College that has more than 550 members, very frequently the student coming through the door is well over the age of 50, perhaps with mobility or hearing issues, but always excited to be “back in school”.

Thus, diverse ages are represented at the Hutchinson Center. With the senior waiver program supported by the University of Maine System, it is quite common to see a gray head bent over a project next to a much younger one. Instructors report that these non-traditional students make their classes challenging and most enjoyable not only because the older students are highly motivated to do the work but they also bring a wealth of life experiences into the classroom. One outcome of this mix of ages at the Hutchinson Center is a proposal received from a group of Senior College members to establish a non-traditional master’s degree for retired individuals, a degree that would emphasize community service and allow the development of a unique and personalized curriculum for those without any plans to re-enter the workforce and use the degree for promotion or a career change. The focus of the proposed master’s degree is learning for the joy of it and to give back to the community in which the retired individual lives. As this proposal is winding its way through the labyrinth of curriculum approvals required, a certificate program may emerge first as a step towards the goal of the master’s degree. The Master of Arts in Liberal Studies appears to be the vehicle within which this unique concentration may reside. The seed for the development of this proposal was the invigorating experiences that the Senior College members enjoyed by participating in classes alongside traditional and non-traditional age classmates. So diversity fueled their creative juices.

These seniors could continue to take classes as they wish. However, they find themselves wanting recognition for their efforts in the form of a traditional degree or certificate. They are seeking the structure of a formal program even though that program will be individually planned and unique. By embracing higher education, they are validating their ability to learn and produce valuable work at a high level, to be productive citizen leaders in their communities. It’s an affront to ageism, to the stereotype of the elderly as cut off from society and the work-world, rotting in their rocking chairs and waiting to die. These elders are dynamic, bright, capable, energetic individuals who still have a lot of life to live and want that life to be productive and valued.

Diversity comes in many flavors. At the Hutchinson Center the diverse ages have created a vibrant and enriched learning environment where creativity, sharing and a strong sense of community is alive and well.