University of Maine
Diversity Leadership Institute

Opening Doors, Minds, and Hearts

Diversity Reflections

2011
UMDLI Reflections 2010-2011

Victoria Kane

It is hard to believe I have been in UMDLI going on a year. This first year for me has been all about becoming more and more aware of the values and biases I have learned growing up and beginning to question some of them myself. Participating in UMDLI’s monthly sessions and attending NCORE has been an eye opening experience. However the key to this process has been the monthly meetings. Creating a safe, supportive environment through the facilitators and group members allowed me to talk about things that I may find tough to share and in this sharing, learn its okay to make mistakes. In the first meeting we wrote down our hopes, nightmares and fears which began our journey of trust in each other and the group. Having them posted allowed them to be addressed and acknowledged and contributed to the group connections.

I have had many experiences which have led me to question my own ethnocentrism. I remember at NCORE being very nervous when the session leaders had all of us walking around the room just looking at our feet. When they moved on to having each of us greet others, people started greeting each other as long lost friends. I remember being nervous at first but, that changed when I got into the spirit of greeting and being greeted warmly. It was quite profound recognizing conscious and unconscious fears within me and letting them go. Feeling more connected with other humans then I had and it contributed to making the session quite memorable.

The monthly meetings seemed to always give me something to look at differently. The October 15th meeting stood out for me. I remember one of the facilitators coming in late and I felt the need to explain we were talking about any experiences with Diversity we had in the last month. I thought the facilitator answered in a manner which was abrupt as she stated that she knew what was going on. I found myself feeling grumpy with the person's "abrupt" response. I felt myself withdrawing due to my story about the facilitator being rude. Towards the end of the meeting we were given a questionnaire someone had filled out describing themselves. It turned out the facilitator who I thought had been rude identified his/herself as someone on the autistic spectrum. The person mentioned that one of the characteristics of being autistic was the inability to recognize common social cues. The person also remarked that when this happens she/he is blamed for acting inappropriate. My first response was to feel ashamed at how quickly I labeled someone and my second response was gratitude, which came a little later. I was glad I had learned something important which I will remember. It is human sometimes to jump to conclusions but, I can just notice when I am assigning meaning to someone else and recognize that it is my story not necessarily theirs. I did not share my experience at the meeting because I felt embarrassed. I did share it at the next meeting.

For me learning about diversity is learning about others and learning more about who I am and who I want to be. This first year has been an awakening. I have started taking steps to support diversity by not remaining silent if I think a comment is racist or inappropriate. I have also been more willing to revisit my thinking on how to be supportive of diversity. I have started to say hello to more people on campus when I am out walking. I believe being an ally involves respecting others differences and taking ownership of one's own perspective and biases and putting them aside to respect the other. I look forward in the second year to learning more about being an ally and how to be an effective change agent for diversity in my sphere of influence. I also look forward to participate with others who are working to support diversity all over campus.

Jessica Bishop

Growing up, I did not know that I was white. I knew I was a girl with two parents, a younger brother and we lived in a small house on a quiet street in Bangor. I had blue eyes and wicked blond hair, I was a Main-ah. School age brought me to a time in which I could develop
my skills, both academically and socially. I suppose I made the distinction between myself and other children who didn't look like me, or didn't have the things or opportunities I did, but I did not come to be fully aware of diversity until much later in my life. Up until approximately one year ago, I would have identified myself as a Caucasian, heterosexual, middle class female.

My time, experiences and involvement at the University of Maine during the past decade have done nothing short of mold me into the person I am today. This process did not happen all at once, continues as I write this reflection of the past year and will surely progress further in the future. Diversity is every person around us, from all of life’s circumstances and with all different characteristics. The University of Maine Diversity Leadership Institute has provided me, and others before me, with the opportunity to look and think critically about who we are, where we come from, and what the reality is of what we call our community (both here at the University of Maine and beyond).

My first year as a member in UMDLI has brought me to a greater awareness of this. An event that impacted me immensely was our June 2010 trip to NCORE in National Harbor, Maryland, a small ‘city’ that was created around the expansive Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center. The impact from this experience not only came from the topics discussed in sessions, the thought provoking speeches and breathtaking performances and films, but also from the amount of time and experiences spent with my fellow cohort.

At NCORE: In my pre-conference institute, I was “called out” in my institute and recognized my white privilege for what it is. At Kip Fulbeck’s keynote address, I realized that we can talk about diversity and discrimination in many ways, sometimes humorous, and the point can still get across. Step Afrika! showcased a tremendous performance that meshed together a message of diversity, working together, and the performing arts (which is a passion of my own). I viewed ‘The Color of Fear’ for the first time and truly wished that I could sit down with the entire cast, to see where they are now, and how their lives have been influenced by being part of such a notable film. In the past academic year, we have been fortunate to have knowledgeable speakers about gender, classism, and more. Utilizing UMDLI alumnae and resources available on campus has been invaluable as we further our knowledge base and “[develop] and [sustain] a multicultural and pluralistic educational community.” (UMDLI mission)

We have learned, we have realized, and, let’s be honest, we have all eaten VERY well, especially while at NCORE. Although we come from different backgrounds, different departments on campus, and lead extremely different lives, we come together once every month to grow as individuals, both personally and professionally, we grow closer to each other as we share this opportunity and we have fun as a group.

I look forward to our sessions next year, the discussions we will have and the time we will spend together. The UMDLI experience is one that anyone can benefit from, and, in time, more and more people on campus and in our community will be influenced by UMDLI members and our mission. I am still learning and I will continue to do so. Today, I identify myself as a Caucasian, heterosexual, middle class female who is without physical limitation ('able') and who has distinct (at times unrecognized by myself) white privilege.

“We must become the change we want to see in the world.”  ~ Gandhi
Dori Pratt

As my first year of participation in The University of Maine’s Diversity Leadership Institute comes to a close, I’m thankful that we’re being asked to reflect. My UMDLI journey began in May of 2010 as my cohort traveled to National Harbor, Maryland, for NCORE 2010. In preparation for this trip, I had spoken with several Active Alums about what NCORE was like for them. With their advice and stories in mind, I also prepared to absorb the conference through my own lens. NCORE proved to be a really refreshing and honest experience for me. In particular, I remember sitting at a table with people whose lives didn’t resemble my own at all and sharing feelings about race. That was probably one of the most memorable experiences I’ll ever have. I didn’t feel overwhelmed or marginalized, but relieved.

UMDLI has continued to give me the feeling of relief: relief that on this campus, in Maine, we are doing social justice work every day; relief that we are examining both the personal and systematic nature of racism, classism and other isms. We’re talking about it, we’re learning about it, we’re growing with this work. We’re bringing speakers to campus to carry it out further than we can ourselves. I’m noticing more diversity on campus and I’m relieved that this is our experience, together.

That being said, I’m hoping my second year of UMDLI provides even more opportunities to learn how to connect this work with our campus population at large. I want to know how our students feel about diversity—are they relieved also? Do they know that we are trying to make this a comfortable place for everyone? I’m anxious to find ways that we can continue to share what we learn at UMDLI with people all over campus and in our communities. There is no doubt that there is more work to do and I am excited to be a part of the team that will continue to spread lessons and growth across our campus.

Carey Nason

…where to begin…

I have greatly enjoyed being a part of the UMDLI. I have been able to meet new people on campus, consider the impact of my actions on not only those around me here at the University, but also how I interact with people within the community and in my personal circles, and I think about my choices and perspectives in some different ways.

When I first began with UMDLI, I thought about diversity as mostly racial diversity. During the past two years, I have been exposed to concepts of how diversity is so much more than that. And then I wondered where did I ever get that idea-that race was all diversity meant? And how far back do I need to go with some “undoing?” And, I’ve been able to use my experiences in ways to be helpful, even if at first I had shame around some of that.

One of my key learnings has been around the intersections of race, class, privilege, ethnicity and gender. You really can’t address one without addressing one of the others. I have often struggled with how am I going to “give up” my privilege for the benefit of others? What if I don’t want to give up my privilege?...and then it dawned on me that it’s not about giving up my privilege, it’s about using it to benefit others. I can use y privilege to decide many things. Do I use my voice to speak up for others, without assuming what those other voices would be? How do I choose where to spend my time and money? Do I consider the impact of my actions on others or do I just blindly continue on, with no awareness of what I’m doing and how it may actually hurt
someone? I have noticed how I don’t notice “whiteness,” because of my own whiteness, and how that is a privilege. I have noticed how it’s easier for me to see privilege in the ways I don’t have privilege, and have really done some soul searching around that. I have really thought about how and when are the ways it’s more appropriate to use “honey” to convey messages and when “vinegar” is what’s needed.

Being a part of UMDLI has accentuated my professional and personal development. I have new ways of addressing prejudice in a variety of settings. I have a whole group of people now within the University community who I can go to for questions and support around any number of issues. I am going to miss being involved in UMDLI. It has been such a fulfilling process and I’m glad I can continue to represent the UMDLI, and the University in his capacity as an active alum member.

**Tiffany Doescher**

One year ago I was boarding a plane with a group of strangers. A week later I returned home with a group of friends. What we experienced at NCORE last year was at times indescribable. I was forced out of my comfort zone, made to feel like a minority, and was a witness to the pain many people experience in our world. This was just the introduction to a new world of thoughts and ideas for this naïve small town girl. Forms of discrimination I once thought were a thing of the past are very real today even though I may not witness this in my everyday life.

My most frequent encounters with diversity on this campus come through my work as the financial aid liaison for Onward students. This group of non-traditional college students is very needy and often these students are of a different social class than many of our traditional aged students. I have discovered many more diverse features of this group, however, in addition to their social class. I work with students in this program who have mental health issues, have previously been incarcerated, or who have faced discrimination in the past due to their sexual orientation, just to name a few examples. I’m glad the University is able to provide an accepting environment for all of these students and am proud to be a part of that.

UMDLI is so much more than just monthly meetings for me. It has changed the way I think about the world and my interactions with others. I am slowly gaining the courage to speak out against unjust statements and actions. My awareness has been heightened by this experience. I am looking forward to the coming year of experiences through UMDLI and am anxious to see how much more I will grow as a result. I have enjoyed the connection I’ve made with my peers and the safe environment that we’ve built together. It is hard for me to believe a year has already gone by and I am anxious to continue my journey. I am very much looking forward to another year of learning, discussing thoughts and ideas, and just simply becoming more aware of myself and the world. I am very thankful for the opportunity I have been given to be a part of UMDLI.

**Sue McCullough**

Reflecting back over two years of UMDLI several events stand out for me. One was the visit of Chief Oren Lyon. I was fascinated by his perspective, his philosophy and the way he started the meeting. I had never had an opportunity to engage in a philosophical dialogue with a Native American Chief before and I didn’t want it to end. His obvious love of nature and his people were most evident. His life’s experiences are the fodder for legends.

A second event that left an indelible impression was the recent visit by an amazing father. What courage it took to share his story. How blessed his children are to have a father who loves each
of them enough to protect them and grow with them as each becomes all they can be and who they want to be. It made me reflect on my own father who I know loved me very much but who was greatly influenced by his belief in traditional gender roles. I kept challenging those beliefs and I know I left him confused at times. I had to prove him wrong. Ultimately I know he was proud of me but he never understood who I was and what I believed in and to his dying day put me in my place secondary to his sons.

A third event was attending the NCORE conference in San Diego. I was stunned, shocked, angry, and challenged which sometimes made it more difficult to hear. Reflecting back from the space of two years I did hear and I learned. The many discussions in UMDLI, the visitors, the readings, put the conference in a context of similar messages repeated by the diverse people and philosophies we have shared.

UMDLI has given me new friends and acquaintances, new insight into my own and others ways of being, and new ideas to chew on. It hasn't changed the world I live in but it's helped me to live in that world differently.

Barbara Smith

First of all I'd like to thank Devon Storman and Bob White for the initial invitation to be a part of UMDLI. Seven years ago when UMDLI first began, I was invited to join the UMDLI Planning Committee. It was truly an affirming experience to have my interests and skills in the area of social justice recognized and utilized.

Over the past seven years my connections with UMDLI has provided me a supportive, affirming space to learn more about how I and others respond to difference and diversity. I have also been able to test my skills in helping others explore these issues. My experience with UMDLI has made me more confident and more committed to educating myself and others about social justice. I am more willing to challenge actions and comments that are oppressive or exclusive based on social identities. With the support of my colleagues in UMDLI I feel I am an active part of something on the UMaine campus that can really make a difference.

Now I am delighted to be one of the group of four who was selected to attend NCORE this summer and play a role in planning the new version of the UMaine Diversity Institute. I am truly honored to be involved in UMDLI which is an important grassroots social justice effort on the UMaine campus. This opportunity has provided for me support and renewed motivation to develop and apply my skills and understandings of community, diversity and social justice. I look forward to continuing my involvement in UMDLI and working with more people who are committed to social justice.

Shelly Chasse-Johndro

“We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color.”

~Maya Angelou
My views, beliefs and understanding of diversity is challenged daily at a predominantly white institute and in a predominantly monolingual state. As Maya Angelou’s quote reflects diversity makes for a rich environment to learn, explore and live. Unfortunately, for many Mainers they do not see diversity as a rich tapestry will threads that are equal in value. While exploring my Franco-American culture it was illustrated that even this small minority population was not always accepted into the community, church, and school. In 2011, this lack of acceptance is still apparent with the racial comments and feelings made to our new Mainers better known as the Somali immigrants and refugees. So, the challenge I have set for myself is to expand my knowledge and understanding of diversity to be able to educate others who are open, willing and ready to embrace diversity. As my appreciation for diversity continues to grow the challenge will evolve.

Margo Lukens

I have a number of things in mind this year, some positive and some less so. On the positive side, an effort I made with the Chair of my department has created a 3-year Libra Professorship for Assiniboine playwright, William S. Yellow Robe, for the calendar years 2011, 2012 and 2013. He will teach a class on campus every semester (including summers) these three years. But the institution is still afraid to make more than a temporary commitment to him, even though the Native literary world, the Smithsonian, the Public Theater in NYC, etc., value William Yellow Robe as a national treasure. We have had the chance since 2007 to hire him, but within my department the discussion always reverts to credentials. This seems to me to be a way to resist the incorporation of someone really different, to compare and reject on the basis of credentials.

I also got a lot of support from my departmental events committee to bring four Native American writers to campus at the end of April, but none of my colleagues came to the events. I feel like that is a mixed message, or a way to strike a bargain that achieves a benchmark of “diversity” but preserves the status quo—people’s minds don’t get changed that way. The audience that came was delighted, but they knew what to expect, mostly.

I think the most disturbing “diversity” experience of the spring was the Victor Lewis & Peggy McIntosh visit to campus. The trouble was that the campus was not prepare for their visit. Yes, there were students who had ready Peggy McIntosh, there were some who were studying multiculturalism in their disciplines, but this was an opportunity to reach a whole bunch of people who had not yet considered the idea of privilege and their own privileged status—lost. I attended the midday session, and saw the session fall flat at the end, when none of the students wanted to speak about what they had learned. The subject is huge, as we all know, and not one that can be easily confronted. Especially here in Maine, where it seems you can’t get to any of the other forms of privilege until you have opened with class privilege. We had not prepared our students for this idea, and they were initially reading it through male privilege and white privilege, as Peggy & Victor laid it out. I had conversations with a student afterwards who, in spite of the session’s title (beyond blame, shame & guilt) felt blamed because he is a white male. I’m sure he wasn’t alone, so it felt to me like an opportunity bungled. If there had been more collaboration among campus units, we could perhaps have created some campus forums in preparation for the event, and to follow up the event—that would have been really constructive,
and not that hard to coordinate. But the institutional pattern is for an individual or a unit to get a feeling it’s time we did something, and then to do it alone, usually by throwing money at it.

So, thematically, the year has felt like it’s about spending money of various kinds, but not making lasting changes. I’m about to begin my 20th year at the University of Maine, and it feels like plus ca change, plus c’est la meme chose.

**Mary Beth Willett**

After graduating from the University of Maine’s Diversity Leadership Institute, it was important to continue the work that had begun two years previously. An invitation came from the coordinator to attend the UMDLI planning committee meetings and it was exciting since many of the graduates were attending these meetings in our first year as Alumni. Being able to continue these relationships was helpful and important. It helped to bridge the gap of attending the monthly four hour meetings to at least be able to connect for two hours each month! Having been in the seat as the new person it was good to be helping to plan sessions however, it was still scary. Now we had to put our two years of personal and professional growth into action and help the new cohort to learn and grow.

Fast forward two years and now after having been part of the planning committee, this group has also grown in many ways and we still challenge each other in this work. Discussions of topics and issues help to continue this work but we also have taken on the task of reshaping the experience of new members of UMDLI. No matter what my contribution, whether it is attending meetings, offering suggestions, sharing my own experiences or co-facilitating a session, each of these experiences is a reminder of why this work is so important.

The other benefit of being a part of this diversity initiative is the ability to work with staff from around campus that normally would not occur within our day to day responsibilities. In addition, we have an appreciation for the different roles and responsibilities we have on campus and can share how this work impacts our lives as well as gaining wisdom from the group when a difficult situation may arise.

Working on social justice issues, diversity and issues of white privilege is important to us as individuals and equally important to the mission of the university. UMDLI is planting the seeds to bring about this awareness a few people at a time. The seeds start growing from the first time the cohort agrees to become part of UMDLI. Throughout the year attending the four hour monthly sessions much learning takes place and after experiencing Diversity though several lenses, participants often have a variety of “aha” moments. It is these “aha” moments that have kept me coming back to
meetings and wanting to continue this journey into the next chapter of UMDLI. Being accepted into the “train the trainer” phase will further enhance my experience as a facilitator for sessions as well as help in preparing for the transformation of the new phase of UMDLI.

Here’s looking forward to many more years working with the UMDLAC and UMDLI!

Devon Storman

**Power—noun**
- ability to do or act; capability of doing or accomplishing something
- political or national strength
- great or marked ability to do or act; strength; might; force
- the possession of control or command over others; authority; ascendancy: power over men's minds

“When did power for me become a bad word?” I asked myself this question recently as I reacted to local and world happenings. Why are these “powerful” people doing such bad things? Are power and bad synonymous?

Given the above definitions of power the answer to my last questions is “of course not!” Power can be used for good as well as bad. Then, realizing this, why do I still feel so powerless and violated? Perhaps I am questioning my own use or lack of use of power to influence people to do good. Perhaps I am even wondering what power I have and don’t recognize having. Perhaps I am afraid of personal power and the stakes of using that power.

As I reminisce about the past sessions of UMDLI and the UMDLI mission, it is easy to see that UMDLI is all about power. Power for the good. Our members train to be able to understand difference, structural systems, and motivations. We use our training to effect change within our spheres of influence as role models and change agents. Our contacts are many and our ripples reach way beyond our imaginations.

The UMDLI does not have an oath but if we did I think it would be to use our personal power and strength to act in a way that accomplishes great things using empathy and caring to guide us. We must not make the mistake of commanding acceptance of our beliefs nor use our authority to command allegiance to our values. Our work speaks for itself. We can lead and the good will follow.

Barb Blazej

This gathering marks my official end as a member of the UMDLI planning committee. It has been a pleasure and privilege (the good kind of privilege!) to serve on this committee for the past several years. I have enjoyed (and will miss) the always-fascinating and informative conversations we have had around many diversity issues. I have appreciated the opportunities I had to plan and
occasionally co-facilitate some UMDLI sessions, which furthered my own learning and hopefully contributed in some way to meeting the needs of UMDLI members. And I treasure the relationships that I have formed with many of you, which I hope will continue beyond today.

The UMDLI experience is about personal growth and learning, and it also invites us to apply our learning in our everyday lives--at home, work, and in the community. Each of us in this room has the ability to effect change in some way. Each of us can help shift our communities, society and world--inch by inch--towards a true culture of peace. I would like to end with the words of a well-known American activist for social justice, specifically around issues of women's suffrage, child labor, workers' rights, and the rights and education of people with disabilities--Helen Keller:

"I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker."

Thanks, and good luck to everyone!