University of Maine Diversity Leadership Institute
Reflections from Members 2011-2012

Jessica Bishop

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

Again, as often, I find that the above quote is pertinent to the issue at hand. The world consists of young and old, black and white, Christian and Muslim, wealthy and poor, and the list goes on. In order to diminish the divide between each of those pairings, we all, as individuals and as a group unified by the same goal, must take the stance that the change CAN occur, just as Gandhi states in the aforementioned quote.

Diversity is something that many people in the University of Maine/Orono area are not frequently faced with. When and if they are, some are at a loss for what appropriate responses may be. How do you deal with a group of international students? A colleague practices a much different religion – can you approach them and talk with them in the same way? Social class divides seem to be growing, and when you are in the “middle”, how can you interact with either side, knowing the differences that exist? I feel fortunate for my time in UMDLI because of the time I was able to spend with my peers talking about how our population IS diverse and everybody brings their own special uniqueness to the table. By doing what we can to spread the word to our colleagues, neighbors, friends, etc., even if only one person comes to see the necessity and brilliance of diversity, at least that is one additional ally!

Through my experiences in UMDLI, I have had the opportunity to learn, to discuss, to network, and to grow. Our conference experience at NCORE in June 2010, our monthly sessions centered on specific topics, as well as passing conversations, emails, and campus events have all culminated in a two year experience that has provided many positives: a personal growth, a unifying group of professionals, and an opportunity to live the UMDLI mission.

UMDLI Reflection 2012
Maida Cordero

After two years in this group I have decided that I still have so much to learn about diversity in all of its forms. That being said I have learned so much in the past two years. Mostly I have learned to recognize my own feelings in different situations I come across in my life. My reactions are something I never used to put much stock in. I never really thought that it was all that important in the long run. It wasn’t until this group that I realized that it was important to me, my life and the way I live it in the presence of others.

As my fellow group members know I often talk about my experiences with my family and my son Luis specifically. Having a child changes so many things in your life and the one thing I didn’t know would change so much would be how his experience in life will be so different than mine. Even now at the age of 5 he notices subtle differences and shares them with me. I know that all of the education and exposure to different topics on diversity will only help me explain things to him so for that I am grateful. He is young and is learning how he fits into this world and I can only hope that through continuing to learn and showing him how to live a good life to help others that he will be armed with the proper tools to grow up and be a positive difference in this world and not let the obstacles he will most certainly face keep him from knowing and loving who he is.

Each month I have looked forward to meeting with this wonderful group of women and talking about our personal experiences and offering our perspectives and the dialogue that inevitably ensues. I will miss those organized conversations in my life but I will definitely hold them dear. Being a member of UMDLI really has affected my professional work in student affairs and I strive everyday to incorporate everything I have learned into my interactions with students. I feel they benefit from my experiences as much as I do. It has sparked an increased interest in my students’ experiences on campus and my ability to affect a positive change in their lives here at UMaine. I look forward to continuing my education in diversity and passing that along to my students, RAs, Grads and fellow coworkers.

I will forever be appreciative of UMDLI and all it has given me in the past two years.
Tiffany M. Doescher

According to the mission statement of the University of Maine Diversity Leadership Institute (UMDLI), “The UMDLI’s mission is to provide and cultivate opportunities to understand, appreciate, support and strengthen the diversity of our community. The UMDLI promotes a learning and working community that embraces a vision of Open Doors, Open Minds, and Open Hearts.” As a soon-to-be alum of UMDLI, I can proudly say that this mission has been accomplished through the hard work of Devon Storman and all of our UMDLI planning committee members, alums, and of the current UMDLI membership. Diversity work is not easy, but it is something we all value and are willing to embrace with open minds.

Two years have passed since my crash-course introduction to diversity at NCORE in the summer of 2010. I use the term “introduction” because I have always been aware of diversity issues, however, beginning with NCORE, many things I thought I knew about diversity were challenged. I was forced to examine issues I didn’t often think about in my everyday life. I became much more aware of the injustices in our world and of my own privilege.

It is hard to believe I have been with my UMDLI cohort for two years. I have enjoyed my time with all of my new “diversity friends” and feel honored to have been on this journey together. Looking back, my mind has been opened to many new thoughts over this period of time. However, even after two full years of diversity work, I still feel as though I am at the very beginning with much more to learn. I believe diversity work and awareness is a life-long process; I am lucky to have been given the tools to continue this journey as a UMDLI alum.
Victoria Kane

Last year I could not believe a year had gone by and now it has been two years. I had thought I had learned about ethnocentrism as an undergraduate anthropology major. However it dawned on me I was thinking ethnocentrism only applied to people from other countries. Experiencing UMDLI and attending NCORE has given me a deeper understanding about ethnocentrism and cultural differences broadly defined. The more I think about ethnocentrism the more I believe it is not limited to ethnic behavior. I do believe individuals receive socialization from within their ethnic group but, I think it is more complex. The socialization I received as a white woman growing up in New England in a middle class family has shaped my beliefs. I have had many other influences which also have shaped me, for instance having my parents’ divorce when I was ten, reading Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance when I was a first year student, Living in a triple in the dorm, and meeting people who had different beliefs about God. All my experiences have changed me in one way or another, which may or may not conform to my ethnic group. I also know that I cannot change how I look at the world completely, but I can challenge myself to be aware of my initial reactions and to pause and think about what is being triggered for me before voicing them to myself or out loud. When I immediately make a judgment about a person based on my own ethnocentrism, I am limiting our exchange. I want to be an ally and I see being an ally as being open to other people’s experiences. I want to be especially be open to students, faculty and staff who maybe new to the University.

I came across Ken Barger, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the Indiana University of Indianapolis on the web, I am including the website:
http://www.iupui.edu/~anthkb/?enthocen.htm I am including his link because I think his learning materials could be useful for UMDLI members. I am also quoting the professor from his Ethnocentrism article from his website: [Link]www.iupui.edu/~anthkb/a104/notes.htm Professor Barger's essential point is “Ethnic’ refers to cultural heritage, and 'centrism' refers to the central starting point…so 'ethnocentrism' basically refers to judging other groups from our own cultural point of view.’ But even this does not address the underlying issue of why people do this. Most people, thinking of the shallow definition, believe that they are not ethnocentric, but are rather “open-minded” and “tolerant.” However, as explained below everyone is ethnocentric… we don’t understand that we don’t understand.”
I think Professor Barger's point about "We don't understand that we don't understand," is key in realizing our ethnocentrism is deeply rooted in our own socialization and our own personal experiences. Through our biased eyes we cannot completely understand someone else and that includes at times our nearest and dearest. Keeping this in mind may help counteract our initial socialization to judgment. Instead of thinking something is wrong or weird perhaps we could train ourselves to question the judgment’s we often immediately make as human beings in response to something that is not familiar. I could also decide to reframe any initial judgments from "That is wrong" to Hmmmm, that is different and I would like to hear more about what he or she has to say. The point is to create an environment which is open to learning about other people. I think what it means to be an ally is to show support by listening and asking questions for clarification and providing assistance if asked. Conversation is a way of developing connections and reaching out to learn about one another. A friendly, judgment free attitude can go a long way to welcoming people to our community and giving them a sense that they belong. I know from past experience if I open up and decide to share something about myself, I am making myself vulnerable and my openness will close down if I think someone is making a negative judgment about me. I will continue to think about diversity and do my best in my sphere of influence to be supportive of all types of differences. I especially wish to thank UMDLI for an enriching two years. Thank you for the opportunity to learn more about myself and others.
Dori Pratt

It’s April 2012, and it’s a very interesting time to be involved in diversity work. Trayvon Martin’s murderer was just arrested yesterday and charged with second-degree murder and social justice folks everywhere shared a collective sigh of relief. If anyone questions why we have a need for social justice work in today’s society, they needn’t look too far.

My second year in UMDLI has impacted me in deeper ways than the first. I’m feeling more self-aware and more ready to take action and speak out. I’m thankful to my UMDLI colleagues for their friendship and guidance and hopeful to find ways to continue to integrate this work into my everyday life. I’m also looking forward to watching the new UMDLI one-year model take shape and hoping to continue my connections with this terrific campus organization.