DuTalk

Dialogue, Difference, Democracy

DuTalk, a co-curricular program at Loras College that provides the college community with skills in civil discourse, was initiated in August of 2009. The program was created and sponsored by the International-Intercultural Programs Center, which is responsible for developing student programs that promote inclusion. Kristin Andersen-Bricker, Ph.D. (Co-Chair of the Diversity Committee) and Gloria Regalbuto Bentley, Ph.D. (Vice President of Organizational Development) worked with the Center’s staff to design and implement this unique program.

Many colleges and organizations are seeking ways to build a culture of inclusion. The overall goal of the program is to provide students, faculty, and staff with the skills needed to engage in civil discourse, specifically with regard to discussions of diversity and inclusion. It is also a means of engendering pervasive behavior that will anchor the first tenet of Loras Catholic Identity Statement firmly in the culture: "We promote an atmosphere of critical inquiry and academic conversation that includes varied voices, past and present, across Catholic and other traditions." The intention is to provide participants with a method, language, and practice in engaging in difficult, but crucial dialogue.

The need for this civil discourse series was identified after several years through research of the campus ethos by a consultant on cultural diversity initiatives, and through focus groups sponsored jointly by the Diversity and Catholic Identity Committees. The series aims to change the campus culture, creating a welcoming environment for cultural diversity and engagement by training participants in the skills of civil discourse and providing participants with multiple opportunities to apply them in discussions about important and intentionally contentious issues.

Participants meet five times during the semester. Trained meeting facilitators guide the attendees through a process beginning with an orientation that provides learning opportunities in listening, communication and conflict management. To gain immediate practice, participants play a game in groups of 5 or 6 with a deck of cards, each of which contains a mini-case study based on issues of diversity and inclusion. Members of the group take turns practicing facilitation skills and engaging in brief, timed conversations. The group has repeated opportunities to put their ability to take part in dialogue rather than debate into practice. The card's scenarios have been developed by faculty, staff, and students across the campus and are representative of situations they encounter day to day.

After orientation, community members are free to continue to attend the remaining sessions on either a "drop-in" or continuous small group meeting basis. Anyone on campus may drop-in to a session, agree on a topic with other participants, and begin a conversation. Trained facilitators join the groups to ensure focus on the issues, full participation by group members, manage conflict and to ensure that participants don’t back away when the conversation threatens to become contentious.

If a group becomes seriously engaged in an issue and wish to continue to discuss it over several sessions until they have generated an action plan to mitigate or solve a problem, they may do so. The primary goal of DuTalk is to anchor the College’s shared value of inclusion in everyday behavior and to create a critical mass of individuals who are able to step in and respond whenever they observe incidents where community members are not "walking the talk".

The program has now been running for two years and the DuTalk cards have taken on a separate life. They are used in training residence hall assistance and in the College’s "Modes of Inquiry" class, which is required for all first year students. Recognizing that many higher learning institutions share a desire to promote civil discourse, the college has begun the process of professionally printing and offering the DuTalk decks for sale.