

Division of Student Life Multicultural Work Group Departmental Perspective Taking Scan Results and Recommendations

Background: Over the past four years, the Division of Student Life has made significant progress in multicultural organizational development. The current Change Team structure is functioning well in supporting environmental change and staff development in multicultural inclusiveness. A natural next step is to consider how our Division multicultural priority connects directly to the student learning experience.

The concept of “perspective-taking” provides a useful frame for considering the Division’s work in this area. Perspective-taking is a key skill within the UI’s personal and social responsibility institutional learning outcome. Perspective-taking can be more powerful within the context of self-authorship, which helps students explore *how* their beliefs, identity, and social relations have come to be.

Definitions:

Perspective-taking is the ability to engage and learn from perspectives and experiences different from one’s own. Perspective-taking may occur in everyday conversations or structured experiences. While engaging in perspective-taking students enhance their knowledge by attending seriously to differing perspectives and develop respect and empathy for other’s views even in the face of disagreement. They learn that they can reconsider their own viewpoints, and that there is value in exploring other cultures. (From [Engaging Diverse Viewpoints](#))

Self-Authorship is the ability to “know yourself, know what you know, reflect upon it, and base judgments on it.” (D. Davidson, 2011) Self-authorship is a lifelong process that often begins in college. Although early research concluded that “authoring” doesn’t take place until post-college, more recent findings indicate that progress can be made in the early college years, if sufficient support is provided. (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007)*

Why it Matters: Perspective-taking is an essential skill to successfully meet The Iowa Challenge. “*Stretch*” articulates an expectation that students step away from the familiar, experience new cultures and learn from people different from themselves. Self-authorship helps students answer the following questions: “Who am I?” “What do I know?” and “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” Ultimately, perspective-taking and self-authorship provide the foundation for students to participate in more advanced levels of personal and social responsibility, including social justice, social change, and advocacy work. National research indicates that most students, faculty, and staff agree that perspective-taking and engaging diverse viewpoints *should* be a priority at their institution, but less than a third note that it *is* a focus. ([Engaging Diverse Viewpoints, AACU](#)).

Charge: The Multicultural Work Group (MCWG) will conduct a scan across the Division to determine what opportunities the Division provides students to engage in perspective-taking. Questions to consider are:

- What programs, practices, or experiences does each department provide that help students further develop their ability to take seriously the perspectives of others?
- Where are we providing students with an opportunity to engage in self-authorship?

- What are the common elements within these programs, practices, and experiences that allow students to engage in perspective-taking and self-authorship?
- How do we know that these programs, practices, and experiences are effective?

Method:

The MCWG conducted group interviews with staff members in each of the Division's departments. We worked with each department to determine who should participate in the interviews, and two MCWG members attended each interview and created notes representing the key discussion points of the session. Participants received a summary of the project, including definitions and questions, prior to the interview.

MCWG members discussed themes and implications of the interviews using the following guiding questions:

- In which types of settings (programming, consultations, student employment, etc.) do we seem to consistently be providing perspective taking and self-authorship opportunities across all (or most departments)?
- What strikes you as "missed opportunities" for perspective taking and self-authorship?
- Culture change in this regard will also involve education for Division staff. On what topics do you think it would be useful to provide further education and support for Division staff?
- What are the key elements (e.g., peer to peer learning, reflection built into experience) that you note are present when perspective taking is likely to occur?

Impressions:

- These concepts, at least their formal terms, are new to most staff members. Staff development will need to be a deliberate focus with this priority.
- Departments are all over the board with regard to the extent that these activities are embedded in the daily work they do. Some, like UCS and WRAC, view their work as centered on perspective-taking and self-authorship.
- Our initial hypothesis was that there was enough rich work occurring that could be adapted to include self-authorship and perspective-taking, that new programs would not be necessary. Consensus was that this hypothesis was supported by our scan.
- For all departments, especially those that are not "programming focused", student employment and internships are a key opportunity to capitalize upon.
- The Work Group discussed the impression that few departments mentioned cross-Division collaborations or work they do in concert with other departments.
- Missed opportunities come mostly in the form of a lack of formal reflection and leaving the "why" of various activities implicit vs. explicit.
 - Naming is important. Just as we learned with Iowa GROW, it seems logical that explaining to students that a specific experience is expected to challenge their perspective or help them think about who they are helps set the stage for learning.
- Common elements of effective practices across departments:
 - They include structured reflection.

- Teachable moments or situations with ambiguity are good food for perspective-taking/self-authorship talk
- They may be more likely to occur within the context of a trusting relationship, or at the least, a safe environment
- Situations of daily living can be a catalyst (for instance, living with a roommate)
- Additional effective practices cited in the literature, but not necessarily noted in interviews:
 - Activities that promote interaction and deep listening
 - Situations that expose students to controversial and provocative topics (religion, politics, identity issues, etc.)
 - Residence hall living provides a particularly rich context for these processes
- Key self-authorship principles are evident in the ways staff members discuss their work. However, they are often not explicit. Staff members may benefit from learning explicitly about the Learning Partnerships Model (Baxter Magolda) principles and how to apply them to their work:
 - Validate students as knowers
 - Situate learning in students' experiences
 - Define learning as mutually constructing meaning
- Tom's Conversation Starters and Iowa GROW have both helped to start movement toward more focus on meaning making and reflection in the Division. There is more work to do.

Notes on our recommendations:

Our recommendations are based on the model of Multicultural Organizational Development by Pope, Mueller, and Reynolds, the AACU Engaging Diverse Viewpoints document, and Baxter Magolda's Learning Partnerships Model, all of which we have used to guide our work.

While we are not recommending the creation of new programs at this time, it is possible that this will make sense in the future. Our focus has been on how we can best ensure the widest possible reach for multicultural learning among students. Our approach accommodates the variations in mission and scope across the 9 Division departments.

Recommendations:

- **Capture student voices to enhance our understanding.** Complete individual interviews with students and map their responses to our departmental scans. This work can be timed so that interviews inform our staff development work. We would share results back with departments to support the value of providing such opportunities. These interviews will continue to inform our understanding of environments and practices that facilitate self-authorship and perspective-taking.
- Create and provide a **targeted, comprehensive, and ongoing staff development process** focusing on perspective-taking, learning partnerships, and self-authorship. It may be helpful to include an opportunity for staff members to reflect on their own experiences with perspective-taking and self-authorship. Staff development opportunities would be designed to facilitate

understanding of these concepts so that staff members are more likely to use common language across student experiences. Emphasis would also be placed on assessing perspective-taking and self-authorship.

- By targeted we mean that, while every staff person in the Division would benefit from knowing about this work, we recognize that there may be only a few within some departments whose work directly supports this project. We would use multiple and varied communication strategies to ensure that staff feel informed and educated as appropriate to their role(s) within the Division.
- **Connect current Division programs to our framework.** Identify specific programs or practices within each department (if applicable) and work with staff members who facilitate those programs/practices to include specific reflection questions that will support perspective-taking and self-authorship. Examples:
 - Write about a perspective or viewpoint you have come to understand better as a result of this experience.
 - As a result of this experience, what is one thing you have reflected upon?
 - Tell us about something you learned about yourself as a result of this experience? What about something you learned about others?
 - Please give an example of how this experience can assist you in communicating effectively with diverse individuals.
 - Think of a time you have had your own perspective or viewpoint challenged. What did you learn about yourself in that process?
 - Consider a strongly held opinion or perspective you have. Where did your perspective come from? How did it develop? What influenced it?
- **Provide supplemental meaning-making avenues.** Create an option for a “debriefing” or discussion session after an event and include these questions in the debrief. If needed, a member of the MCWG could conduct these sessions. For example, after Alternative Spring Break or certain Lecture Committee offerings, a perspective-taking discussion could be offered.
- **Capitalize on student employment.** Add specific questions targeting perspective-taking and self-authorship as options within Iowa GROW conversations and the Student Employment survey. Identify supervisors to pilot these questions and provide detailed notes on student responses for analysis. Examples:
 - Please provide an example of a time at work when you have had to understand the perspective of another person.
 - What have you learned about yourself as a result of this job?
 - What are your strengths and how have you used them here at work?
- **Create effective communication strategies to reach Division staff members.** Include this topic in a future Town Hall meeting, as well as other Division communications. Link it as a natural evolution of our focus on meaningful conversations with students. This will provide us with a chance to give examples for departments where these concepts are embedded as well as those that might be more difficult to connect.

- **Connect, Connect, Connect.**
 - Connect self-authorship and perspective-taking to Iowa's institution-level learning outcome re: personal and social responsibility.
 - Explicitly connect existing diversity-focused programs such as NCBI, Safe Zone, etc. to perspective taking. Lindsay Jarratt from the CDO supports this approach.
 - Collaborate with the CDO to expand the reach of NCBI and Safe Zone to students.

Current Multicultural Work Group Members:

Sarah Hansen, Chair, VP Student Life
Teri Schnelle, VP Student Life
Wayne Fett, Recreational Services
Tab Wiggins, Residence Education
Linda Kroon, WRAC
Mark Harris, SDS
Katelyn Duarte, RVAP
Tanya Villhauer, Student Health and Wellness
Roy Salcedo, CSIL
Patricia Kruse, IMU
Lindsay Jarratt, Chief Diversity Office

Two staff members from UCS will join us soon: Julie Corkery and Kelly Clougher

*Abes, E. S., Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2007). Reconceptualizing the model of multiple dimensions of identity: The role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*, 1-22.