Why So Tense: A Dialogue about Race and Ethnicity

Report by: Jan Levinson

How easy is it to have a conversation about race and ethnicity on a college campus? Do people always hold themselves back from expressing real opinions on this difficult topic for fear of insulting others? Or can they express themselves fully, even at the risk of a heated discussion over core values? On Thursday, August 5th moderators Jill Severn and Jan Levinson from the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia challenged a group of 28 of UGA’s residential advisors-in-training to tackle the topic of racial and ethnic tensions using the National Issues Forums issue guide “Racial and Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do.” An hour and a half of dialogue left everyone thinking more about these issues and how to cultivate more conversations on difficult topics with students on the UGA campus.

Establishing personal stake in the issue, participants moved quickly into talking about their own experiences on campus as well as in their hometowns. One student said he had often heard people say that UGA was desegregated in 1961, but that the school is still not integrated. Another student described his upbringing in racially divided cities like Savannah and Memphis and how those experiences helped him to appreciate the calm atmosphere at UGA. Others expressed that institutionally the University is adamant about equality for all students, but that socially the campus is still divided – creating latent tensions for ‘non-privileged’ groups. Several in the group commented that people have a tendency to congregate by ‘likeness’ which in many cases means by race and ethnicity – and said that right or wrong, that inclination is simply human nature. Using this early conversation as a springboard, moderators moved into a discussion of the three approaches from the issue guide:
Approach 1: Look Beyond Race and Ethnicity
In this view, we must focus on what unites us, not what divides us and provide equal opportunities for everyone. There has been much progress in bridging racial and ethnic divides, proponents of this approach say, and there will be even more if we eliminate racial preferences, which are unfair to everyone. We must also insist that recent immigrants assimilate rapidly.

Approach 2: Build Self-Identity First
In this view we should acknowledge and accept differences, not blur them. The way to reduce ethnic and racial tensions is to first build racial and cultural identity. We will never learn to get along well with others until we first know who we are -- as individuals from different cultural backgrounds. We must allow minority communities and schools to set their own course, even if it means accepting some self-segregation.

Approach 3: Open All Doors to Everyone
This approach calls for all of us to take an active part in finishing the job of integration. It is a job that we will have to work at by making continuous efforts to meet, talk with, and understand each other better. Proponents of this view oppose policies that encourage or accept racial or ethnic separation. Only through living, working and going to school together -- and setting common goals through community dialogue -- will prejudice subside.

Levinson started with perhaps the simplest question in discussing Approach 1: “Are conversations about race and ethnicity tense?” After a few moments of silence, one participant offered a comment. He said that as a white man he feels that he comes out of every conversation about race and ethnicity feeling guilty, calling it “white guilt” – the weight of privilege that seems to invalidate his commentary on the topic. Nodding in agreement, another student said that his ancestors faced intense discrimination when they immigrated to the United States from Italy just two generations ago. But because he is a white man, that history doesn’t count when having discussions about ethnicity, it is simply pushed aside. “The struggle for African Americans has been much longer than for the immigrants you’re talking about,” answered another student. He went on to describe the pressure that African Americans face to succeed and that despite their lengthy battle for equal opportunities, Asian Americans are considered the “model minority” in America.

Others in the group refocused the conversation on how we talk about race and ethnicity. Several said when they have conversations on this topic, what they say depends on the participants in the conversation. An African American man speaking with other African Americans might speak freely on the topic, but the same man in group of mixed company would feel greater pressure to mediate his commentary. “You feel like you are under a microscope,” said one student, “as if your views will be taken as representative of everyone in your race or ethnic group.” Others agreed, saying that an individual can only speak from his or her own experience and reality – that no one can speak for everyone, but that pressure still looms heavily during these conversations. And perhaps this is one of the major deterrents for engaging with this topic at all.
The moderator steered the students back to one of the core issues for proponents of Approach 1, putting an end to entitlement programs. Did those in the group feel this would ease racial tensions, or would ending programs like affirmative action cause more harm than good? A student in the group gave a personal example to express his opinion. He recalled a competition for a college scholarship during his senior year in high school. Though he felt certain that he was the most qualified applicant he recounted how the scholarship was awarded to another student, an Asian woman who was a recent immigrant. He recalled his frustration at being denied an opportunity because of a preference system for minority students. He contrasted this with a different memory – one from his training as a residential advisor. He said that at a presentation about campus diversity he had learned that although the state of Georgia’s population is more than 30% African American, a mere 5.6% of UGA’s population is African American. “Something is wrong here,” he said. Knowing that the minority student population at the state’s Flagship University did not represent the statewide population made him question getting rid of preference systems.

The rest of the group wrestled with the question of entitlement programs. Many agreed that the most qualified applicants should always be chosen for jobs, college admissions, and the like, but others asserted that these programs are about giving opportunities to qualified minority applicants – not stealing opportunities from others. Though unsure about affirmative action, many suggested that the best way to overcome racial tensions is to build relationships with people of other races and ethnicities. Only then can issues of equality and unity really move in a positive direction.

The closing comment on this approach came back to life at UGA. One student asked where we see minorities on campus. When you look around at the makeup of faculty and staff at the University, you can see inequality. A relatively small percentage of faculty members and administrators are people of color – what message does this send to the minority student population? What message does it send to the student body as a whole? Building on this comment, Severn moved the group into a discussion of Approach 2 which advocates for building racial and cultural self-identity first.

Approach 2 suggests that we will never learn to get along well with others until we first understand who we are as individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The moderator asked the group how they felt about this idea, and how cultural events on campus that celebrated race and ethnicity were received by the student population. Everyone in the group seemed to respond positively to these celebrations on campus, which they said exposed students to different cultures and served as opportunities for breaking down stereotypes. One participant suggested that while college is a great place for expanding horizons, we need to start cross cultural experiences much earlier on in school life to break down barriers. Another woman said that there is tension within some racial groups and supported the idea of promoting self-identity as a way to iron out these internal tensions, before tackling tensions between various groups. Participants felt that characteristics of different racial and ethnic groups should be appreciated and no one favored the idea of enforcing homogeneity to the point that other cultures are made to feel unwelcome or pressured to fit in. They voiced that students should be encouraged to step outside their own comfort zones but struggled with the question of how to make that happen.
The group returned to the idea of segregation on campus, and in the larger world, and why this happens. As in discussion of Approach 1, participants said that it was only natural that on a basic level people look for things in common with other people and at the most basic level skin color and ethnicity is a common denominator. When you walk into a classroom and see two white students on one side and two black students on the other, where do you choose to sit and why? Some said that they never considered race when choosing friendships but that their closest friends were those that shared their hobbies and ideas about the world, not necessarily their skin color. The moderator prompted participants to consider issues outside of the tensions between black and white students on campus, and look at the broader spectrum of race and ethnicity. The discussion explored the perspective of international students and recent immigrants and how their self-identity plays into their life on campus.

Moving into Approach 3, which proposes that we open all doors to everyone and finish the job of integration on all fronts, the discussion turned to one of poverty. Levinson asked the group if working on issues related to poverty was at the core of solving racial and ethnic tensions. The gut reaction from the group was a resounding no. One student said that poverty was a cycle and had little to do with race, so antipoverty initiatives would be ineffective as a solution to racial tensions. Others acknowledged the connection between the two ideas, but said that anti-poverty initiatives are just one component needed to resolve tensions. Another student posited that even in the most utopian society, there will always be poor people – so money is just a band aid to a larger problem.

One participant described his upbringing in a predominately low-income, African American community in Augusta, Georgia. He said that after a few semesters in college, he had trouble connecting with people from that community when he went home--but was unsure exactly where that disconnect originated. Others in the group suggested that the differences in experience, education, and goals might be the hurdle. Another student acknowledged the different needs of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, while people in the middle and upper classes worry about how to pay for college tuition or a new car, those in the lower classes worry about where their next meal will come from. When the difference in what is perceived as a “basic need’ is so great, it is often hard to find common ground. All in the group seemed to agree that access to education was a key ingredient in this communication gap.

The group returned to ideas for how to bridge the gap between different groups. They emphasized that breaking down stereotypes attached to different minority groups is the most essential component in resolving tensions. Several voiced an affinity for portions of Approach 2 and 3 – embracing cultural differences but working together to move forward. Moving towards the end of the discussion, Severn asked the group what could be done at UGA to widen the circle in which discussions about issues of race and ethnicity happen. Many in the group recognized that as residential advisors they have an opportunity as well as a responsibility to introduce students to these discussions and to widen their sphere at UGA. One woman suggested increasing the diversity requirement on campus, so that students must take more than just one class in diversity in order to graduate. Several mentioned the office of student affairs as a place that could put forth initiatives promoting these topics on campus.
The moderator closed by asking the group how they felt about the events of the discussion – was this a format that they responded to? How could this conversation be extended to the dorm residents they supervise? Most agreed that the discussion was productive, but to sell it to students as a program, it would need “the right spin.” Getting people in the door is key, they said, and once they are willing participants then some of the discussion will happen naturally. They suggested doing forums with smaller groups of participants and to expand the conversation beyond black and white, and into talk about the other minorities on campus. Most importantly, they said to be mindful of who is not at the table for a discussion – and consider that perspective. Several in the group said they felt this was an honest discussion, perhaps owing to the format of the dialogue, and seemed interested in trying it again.

The makeup of participants in this forum contributed to the richness of the dialogue. The group was pretty evenly divided with regard to race – half the participants were Caucasian, half were African American, and two individuals were of Asian descent. The room was also evenly split by gender. A third of the group actively participated, and although there was a handful that did most of the talking no one seemed to dominate the dialogue. The conversation was slow to start but picked up steam in the first approach and continued without much break for the rest of the forum. Several participants remarked at the conclusion of the forum that they found the format effective and were even a bit surprised by the openness their peers exhibited during the discussion of such a sensitive topic. They did remark that the discussion would have benefitted from even more diversity, having more participants that were not black or white to contribute to the conversation.

For more information on the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, visit http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg, call (706) 542-5788, or email russellforum@gmail.com