

STARTING AND SUSTAINING A DIVERSITY CLUB FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Description

Many schools support “ethnic” clubs, such as a Black Students’ Union or a Latino Club, but few create clubs aimed at bringing together students of different backgrounds and at challenging racism and prejudice. While it is important to provide spaces for students of similar backgrounds in which they can meet and support one another, it is also vital to provide an intentional space for building bridges to connect students across their differences.

When schools have diverse student bodies, students often self-segregate and have only superficial interactions with the students who are not from their own backgrounds. And the truth is that many classrooms and even individual schools are monocultural: there may be an overwhelmingly dominant racial group or, despite the diversity of the student body, the official culture of the school is that of the dominant group (i.e., a school with African-American and Latino students may still have a Eurocentric culture).

Given our increasingly global culture and our human tendency towards intercultural strife, we must focus on helping students become more open to and less threatened by difference. We must help students become compassionate *and* analytical, able to interact with people from a variety of backgrounds with humility and the ability to sidestep any stereotypes that they might have.

One of the best ways to furnish students with these skills is by including them in the planning and training phases of diversity education. This resource focuses on how to create a club that brings together all kinds of students to address issues of diversity and to create a welcoming, inclusive school climate.

Grade Level: Grades 9-12.

Purpose

To help administrators, teachers, and students create diversity clubs that

- Develop creative leadership among students
- Raise awareness in the school around diversity issues that students identify
- Inspire school communities to address and attempt to solve problems related to issues of diversity
- Make issues of diversity accessible, meaningful, and fun

Before You Begin

There are many ways to start any kind of high school club. A diversity club, however, may require a bit more planning because it exists not merely because students ask for it but because you want to make your school more inclusive. Just as a sports team requires a coach well-versed in that sport, a diversity club needs moderators who not only think we all ought to get along but who also are able to



facilitate conversations about complex topics, such as white privilege, racism, and sexism and who genuinely embrace the rich diversity of the student body without judgment.

Before you call the first meeting of the club, consider the following:

- **Educate Yourself:** Gather some interested administrators, faculty, and staff and create a diversity club taskforce. Commit to educating yourselves about racism and diversity before tackling these thorny topics with students.
 - Create a discussion group that meets to discuss books and/or movies that address race and racism. Consider the following books: “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” and *Other Conversations About Race: A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity*, by Beverly Daniel Tatum; *Uprooting Racism: How White People can Work for Racial Justice*; by Paul Kivel; *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, by James W. Loewen; and *A People’s History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn. Consider watching the movies *Crash*, *Day Without a Mexican*, *El Norte*, *The Ghosts of Mississippi*, or *Smoke Signals* or documentaries like *A Class Divided*, which includes the blue eye/brown eye experiment (available at www.pbs.org), or *True Colors* (a video produced by ABC; available from MTI Film & Video).
 - Attend anti-racism training. Check with groups like the Anti-Defamation League (www.adl.org) and the National Conference for Community and Justice (www.nccj.org) to find training near you or go to www.susanohalloran.com for on-line teacher training.
 - Study anti-bias curricula, such as those resources put out by Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org), Teaching for Change (www.teachingforchange.org), and Susan O’Halloran (www.susanohalloran.com).
- **Secure Administrative and Faculty Support:** A club that addresses controversial issues needs to be supported by the administration and the faculty.
 - Provide a budget for the club so that it can take on substantial projects.
 - Commit certain days and periods to the projects of the club. For example, you may begin by assigning one day each semester during which the club will do some sort of anti-racism or anti-bias education and/or training.
 - Communicate regularly with the general faculty and the administration. Get permission for the activities of the club. Enlist faculty support for and involvement in the club’s events; a school event is more successful when teachers promote the event and tie it into their classroom activities.

Getting Started

Once the administration and faculty feel comfortable with the idea of starting a diversity club at school and have chosen adults to run the club, it is time to enlist students. Some students will naturally gravitate to this topic, but it may help to raise awareness in the community and to invite particular students to participate.

- **Raise Awareness:** Host an event or series of events to engage and/or arouse student interest.

- If there has been a recent incident of prejudice in your school or community, hold a town hall-style meeting about the incident to allow students to share their feelings, concerns, and ideas. Groups often arise out of students' response to a local and recent need.
- Host a panel discussion with local representatives from various civil rights' groups who can talk about the need to address race and racism.
- Sponsor a movie series. Meet a few times over a period of weeks or months. At each meeting, show a movie that deals with issues of racism or prejudice and then facilitate a discussion following the movie. Consider showing movies like *Crash*, *Day Without a Mexican*, *El Norte*, *The Ghosts of Mississippi*, or *Smoke Signals* or documentaries like *A Class Divided*. (Be sure to get parent permission for R-rated movies.)
- **Membership:** While the students who show up for the first meeting are the only ones you need, it can be a good idea to invite other students to join.
 - Who is missing? Once you have met with your original group of students a few times, spend time with the group assessing who from your community is missing from the table. For example, does the diversity club represent the diversity of the student body? Look at the group and ask if people from the following groups are represented: each class level; each ethnic group; each ability level; each gender; each "clique" (i.e., the preps, the band students, the popular crowd, the jocks, etc.); and so forth. You may have other groups at your school that need to be considered.
 - Once the group identifies which group is not represented, create a way to invite a representative from the group to attend the diversity club meetings. Perhaps each student group could send a representative to the diversity club meeting to report back to their own clubs.
 - Invite Leadership. Consider inviting the leaders of other clubs and student government to join the group. Having the student leaders of the school involved helps lend legitimacy to the group and spreads the message faster.
- **Building the Team:** While it is important to start planning how to affect the school community, the diversity club must first focus on educating itself. The club members must be able to discuss "hot button" topics associated with diversity before they can try to lead others into this territory.
 - Team Building: As with any club, engage the students in activities and exercises that help them to develop as a coherent team that works well together. Going on a retreat together, going through a ropes course, having a "lock-in," or just taking time to participate in some social activities can help the club members bond.
 - Students should identify their own sticking points and biases. This can be done by having them do some of the activities that the adults may have done when they went through anti-racism training, by using one or more of the lessons on the www.racebridges.net/schools site, or by having them discuss open-ended questions provided and facilitated by the faculty.

- Students should identify their own passion for the topic. Why do they want to be involved in the important work of creating an inclusive environment and combating prejudice? This personal commitment can become part of the mission statement and will help students to understand one another better.
- Students should develop leadership skills. The diversity club may take some unpopular stands, make people uncomfortable, and have to facilitate sensitive activities and discussions. The students in the club need facilitation and leadership skills to shoulder that responsibility. There are many guides for this. Look to the student government moderators for help. Students should know how to run a meeting, facilitate a conversation, present to a group, and lead a variety of diversity activities. Have students practice these skills together within the club before attempting them with the larger student body.
- Reflect. Take time to allow students to reflect on what they are learning, on what they are good at and on what they need work. This club is about educating the school but it is also about developing the skills and characters of the students in the club.
- **Creating the Agenda:** Allow students to set the direction of the club.
 - Engage students in setting the agenda, mission, and priorities for the team. The adults need to encourage students to think beyond their own community, but students will know what issues are pressing to their peers and which “-isms” are most prevalent at the school. Allow students to speak freely about this and make sure to tackle “local” issues as well as general diversity issues. For example, it is important to address racism, but if the students identify inter-class tension as a problem, spend time developing programs to address that, too. Any activity that helps students develop openness to groups that they consider “other” will help with the overall diversity effort.
 - Help students develop the general values / mission of the club. For example, is the club focused primarily on racism or is it about creating an inclusive culture in general? Are there principles that club members should agree to, such as club members should not engage in “put downs” of any other group of people? Are there some catch phrases the club will use, such as “no hate” or “all are welcome”?
 - Challenge the students to stretch beyond where they are comfortable. Students may begin with wanting to host activities that are about ethnic pride, such as recognizing different ethnic heritage months by providing cultural information and bringing in food from that culture; challenge them to address diversity at a deeper level. Perhaps they are comfortable talking about racism, but can they talk about sexism or address homophobia? Or perhaps they can talk about larger issues, such as the above, but find particular students at the school hard to accept.
 - Allow plenty of time for discussion around all of these issues; meeting regularly and often is essential to the development of this kind of club.

Once students have bonded as a group, addressed some of their own internal prejudices, and identified their priorities, the club can begin to reach out to the larger school community. The possibilities are endless, but here are a few suggestions to help get you started.

- **Listen to students:** they know what's important in the school community.
 - Have club members identify what needs to be addressed and have them go out into the community to interview other students about needs.
 - Hold a town hall meeting about the climate of the school and what could be improved.
 - Have students research the types of diversity activities that they could facilitate with the larger student body.
- **Create a public statement:** make clear what you stand for.
 - Create a mission statement for the club.
 - Design a pledge to oppose racism and to work for inclusion and have the whole student body commit to it.
 - Create a series of PA announcement and posters that describe the philosophy and activities of the club.
 - Come up with a clever campaign around one of the diversity issues the club hopes to address - perhaps this involves a t-shirt design contest or a fundraiser or a clever public act that surprises and educates at the same time.
- **Have Fun:** working on diversity doesn't have to be depressing!
 - Use the visual arts to teach and spread your message. Create a mural that represents the diversity of your school or create an art project in which all may participate by placing their hand or footprint so that the whole school is represented.
 - Bring students together for a concert or "battle of the bands." Ask that participants perform songs that represent hopes for harmony.
 - Create storytelling workshops in which students tell stories of when they have encountered prejudice and of when they have seen prejudice overcome. These stories could be transcribed and then read over the PA over a series of weeks or made into large posters that are placed on the walls.

Consider turning the stories into a staged reading or a full-blown play and perform them for your student body and other guests. Empathizing with others' stories changes our hearts and minds much more quickly and completely than any lecture or textbook ever could. See www.voicesinconflict.com, www.barrelofmonkeys.org, and www.scrapmettlesoul.org for information about schools and organizations that have used theater to tell the stories of their community and to transform themselves and their audience members.

- Host a dinner and discussion and invite students from a school whose students differ from your own. Getting to know people who differ from themselves makes diversity work real to students.
- **Reach Out:** After focusing on your school community, think about how to affect the surrounding community.
 - What issues of prejudice, diversity, and racism affect the surrounding community and larger city? Hold a discussion that addresses those realities.
 - The club could research these issues, become the “experts” and educate the rest of the school.
 - Students could work on passing laws that address issues around affirmative action, hate crimes/speech, and immigration.

Conclusion

Developing a Diversity Club is similar to developing any other club. The club should address student interests, develop students’ abilities as leaders, and challenge students to grow in their understanding of the subject matter and to become more open minded. Still, students need to be nurtured in a club like this more than in a discipline-specific (i.e., math or Spanish) or interest (i.e., chess or theater) club.

The diversity club should challenge its members as well as the school at large. One goal is to create an inclusive community, even for those individuals and groups some of the students in the club may not like.

Another goal is to help the school community acknowledge where it may not be open or welcoming, and that will cause some people to respond negatively to the club. So, this club needs special support so that students can do the larger work of not just focusing on their own interests but engage the entire school community and so that they can handle taking some courageous and difficult public stances.

This resource provides just a few ideas for how to help support a club that deals realistically and authentically with issues of diversity, racism, prejudice, and inclusion. There are many other good ideas out there, and you and your students will have many of them. Please share the ideas you have with us at schools@racebridges.net and feel free to contact us with your questions. Good Luck!

