

5-30-2017

Essential Conversations

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eCommons Citation

Spina, Eric F., "Essential Conversations" (2017). *President's Blog: From the Heart*. 69.
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Essential Conversations

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By Eric F. Spina

For two days last week the President's Cabinet* gathered together away from campus at a retreat devoted solely to the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This was not diversity training nor was it a planning session. Instead, this was an opportunity for the University's senior administration to converse and reflect about difference and diversity so that we might build capacity as a team to navigate demographic challenges thoughtfully and leverage opportunities creatively as the University community becomes more diverse.

Because I sincerely believe that we must change to be true to the fullness of our mission — and because these sentiments were raised time and again by faculty, staff, students, and alumni during our strategic visioning process — it was very easy for me to say these words at my installation address this spring:

"We must also create a more diverse, welcoming, and interculturally inclusive campus. By definition, excellence requires greater diversity, as it enriches our learning environment and expands our institutional intelligence and creativity."

Let's face it, it is much harder to move beyond the talk and realize this vision. Greater compositional difference will indeed bring tensions and challenges, and it will take work from all of us to leverage and create value inherent to enhanced diversity.

I am proud of my Cabinet colleagues, who came together during a period of many demands on their time to focus their energy exclusively on these mission-critical issues. As a team, we came to agreement on the gravity of the issues and strengthened our collective resolve to tackle them. The retreat brought us into periods of critical reflection and some vulnerability as we spoke frankly about our identities and came to understand better how our personal and professional paths have influenced our perspectives on issues of difference, including race, ethnicity, and gender but also many other forms of diversity. We believe this experience will help us work *together* and with the UD community to thoughtfully develop and implement a strategic plan for diversity and inclusion, and to be able to respond constructively when we do face challenges, as tensions around diversity too often lead to misunderstanding and hurtful conflict.

In our retreat, we acknowledged that we do fall short in some areas, and we spent some time talking about the different ways tensions and challenges around diversity arise on our campus. We expect that some of these challenges will strain us, but we also firmly believe that our Catholic and Marianist educational values, our belief in the dignity of each individual, and our strong commitment to building community will strengthen us as we meet these challenges. Blessed Chaminade called us to be a “community in permanent mission,” and our quest to fulfill our mission through greater diversity will demand that every one of us embrace learning and growth.

Leaving the retreat, I felt both realistic about the challenges before us and extremely optimistic. I know that each member of the President’s Cabinet is deeply committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion; that our capacity individually and as a team has been strengthened and will continue to grow; and that we have the resolve to tackle the tough issues because we do indeed see the incredible opportunity available to us as a community. And, perhaps most importantly, we are at the University of Dayton, a Marianist community of great strength and virtue where individuals are deeply committed to each other and to the good of the institution.

So, what’s next and what does this mean for the broader community of faculty and staff?

I recognize that, as a campus community, we have engaged in a wide range of activities and initiatives focused on diversity and inclusion, some of them longstanding and others brand new, some focused at a local level and others cross-University, and some the result of significant planning and others more organic. I affirm that these are all important, especially as they are “owned” by key stakeholders.

Early this coming fall, Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Larry Burnley will extend his “listening and learning” sessions into a multi-year, all-University strategic planning exercise for diversity, equity, and inclusion. I encourage all members of the UD community to participate in that process as opportunities arise. That strategic plan, along with the probing campus climate assessment that will accompany it, will be important for our long-term success — the full embrace of all forms of diversity, broad inclusion, and the achievement of equity — but it is also important that every day, week, and month bring us increased understanding of the value of diversity and growth as a community. At the same time, divisions and units will pursue a variety of exercises, learning activities, and initiatives over the coming years, many of which will be tailored to each area’s functions.

For now, I want the campus community to know that the President’s Cabinet is engaging these important issues honestly and directly and is dedicating significant time to our own growth and development so that we will be as prepared as possible for the opportunities — and the challenges — ahead of us.

*The President's Cabinet includes leaders of all the major divisions of the University and key senior administrators: President, Provost, VP Finance and Administrative Services, VP Mission and Rector, VP Advancement, VP Student Development, VP Athletics, VP and General Counsel, VP Marketing and Communication, VP Diversity and Inclusion, VP Strategic Enrollment Management, VP Research, VP Human Resources, VP Facilities and Operations, Secretary of the Board of Trustees, and Executive Director of the President's Office.