Despite seeming endless debate and public attention given to the issue for several decades, those committed to creating welcoming and engaging campus environments for all students recognize that there is considerably more work to be done, and ask “Why aren’t we there yet, and when will we be done?”

This book focuses on guiding individuals and groups through learning how to have difficult conversations that lead us to act to create more just campuses, and provides illustrations of multiple ways to respond to difficult situations. It advocates for engaging in fruitful dialogues regarding differing social identities including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, to lead readers through a process that advocates for justice, and for taking personal responsibility for contributing to the solution.

The book is framed around the five elements of the process of engaging in difficult conversations that not only advocate for change but also create change: self-knowledge, knowledge of and experiences with others, understanding historical and institutional contexts, understanding how to change the status quo, and transformative action.

Moving Beyond the Talk

From Difficult Dialogue to Action

Sherry K. Watt

In the word question, there is a beautiful word—quest. I love that word. We are all partners in a quest. The essential questions have no answers. You are my question, and I am yours—and then there is dialogue. The moment we have answers, there is no dialogue. Questions unite people.

—Elie Wiesel (Winfrey, 2000)

Many college campuses in the United States are striving to increase the number of students of color, provide course offerings that help all students learn about cultural difference, and introduce experiences that will help prepare students to be successful in a diverse society. Administrators at some institutions are pursuing these efforts because they are motivated by the basic principle that diversity is good, which requires only a surface-level understanding of systematic oppression. A cursory understanding of systematic oppression leads campus administrators to focus on outcomes without assessing the underlying problems that contribute to a marginalized and a less satisfactory college experience. Systematic oppression uses embedded, integrated, and interacting “contexts and social roles” (Cecero, 2010, p. 498) that “stigmatizes and violates the targeted group” (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007, p. 6) through unwanted domination and repression. Such systems can and do include families,
schools, religious organizations, and institutions. “Systems of oppression are woven into the social fabric so that their processes and effects become normalized” (Hardiman et al, p. 37). For instance, officials of a higher education institution might primarily focus on increasing the number of students of color without seriously evaluating the quality of their existence on campus. Other institution administrators are striving to embrace strategies that disrupt systematic oppression on a deeper level, shifting their view to demonstrate that diversity matters as a central and integrative dimension rather than a required and marginalized part of the college experience. Higher education institutions moving in this direction are embracing diversity as a value. Nonetheless, these institutions are situated in a society that has historically devalued difference, and therefore the change to embrace diversity as a value is often met with resistance. Maneuvering the resistance to change should involve difficult dialogues on how valuing diversity is actually manifested in the day-to-day life of a higher education institution. It also involves earnest reflection about what actions are needed to change the organization at the cultural level. The process of embracing diversity as a value requires that campus leaders find a thoughtful balance between dialogue and action.

This chapter focuses on describing the nature of difficult dialogues; the dynamics and impact that power, oppression, and privilege have on these dialogues; the role of dialogue in the organizational change process for higher education institutions; and practical strategies student affairs professionals can employ to address social justice issues from a human and an environment perspective. As an overall approach to moving beyond talking about diversity to action steps that work toward actual social change on college campuses, I describe how student affairs professionals can use dialogue on meaningful questions as a strategy to guide faculty, staff, and students to face the challenges together related to embracing and enacting diversity as a value. Specifically, this chapter addresses the following questions: What is a difficult dialogue? How do the dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege affect dialogue? What is the role of dialogue in the organizational change process of inclusion? And what are the key conditions needed for a productive dialogue?

**WHAT IS A DIFFICULT DIALOGUE?**

As student affairs professionals, we spend the majority of our time engaged in dialogue with colleagues, faculty, and students. Dialogue is defined as a
conversation between two or more individuals (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002). Often, learning in college involves an active pursuit of knowledge through students’ engaging in dialogue with classmates, faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals. Therefore, being able to continue to engage in dialogue without becoming overwhelmed by feelings of anger, hurt, or fear (Patterson et al.) is important to learning. Dialogue often becomes difficult because of personal and social investments, but also communication is complicated by the historical and structural dynamics of the relationship between marginalized and dominant identities of those involved in the conversation. Communication between, for instance, an African American and a White person is rarely completely without the historic memories that are associated with being raised in a society with unequal distribution of power because of race. And of course, there is the unique slant on any communication because of the particular individual’s personal and family history as well as personality characteristics. A difficult dialogue “is a verbal or written exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views of beliefs or values about social justice issues (such as racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism/homophobia)” (Watt, 2007, p. 116). These dialogues are difficult because they involve an awakening to different views individuals have of ideas that have roots in the interrelationship of power, oppression, and privilege for marginalized and dominant groups in this society.

HOW DO THE DYNAMICS OF POWER, OPPRESSION, AND PRIVILEGE AFFECT DIALOGUE?

The impact of historical and structural dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege is ever present in dialogue between members of dominant and marginalized groups (Reason & Davis, 2005; Spring, 2010). Power addresses the sociopolitical processes that characterize one group’s interaction with another (Pharr, 1997). Specifically, institutional and economic power defines the relationship individuals have with each other. For example, marriage for most of the United States is an institution reserved for heterosexual couples that leads directly to economic power in the form of tax benefits. Therefore, the right for heterosexual couples to get married defines their position of higher power in relation to a gay or lesbian partnership. A gay or
lesbian couple’s existence is restricted by institutional laws that in many states deny nonheterosexuals the right to marry, which has direct implications on their economic capacity in the society. Where people are situated in the power dynamic characterizes their view and experience, which likely frames the perspective or lack thereof when in dialogue with another. A heterosexual person engaging in dialogue with others might unearth awakenings about power, oppression, and privilege that he or she has enjoyed based on heterosexual privilege. While the outcomes of this privilege have limitations on the lives of all individuals regardless of their sexual identity, direct limitations are placed on the day-to-day life of a gay or lesbian person. Resultantly, the dialogue between a heterosexual person and a gay or lesbian individual is situated within that context.

Oppression is defined by a system that limits power, interests, or opportunities of those who are members of marginalized groups. Oppression is not just random acts by individuals but involves a comprehensive set of interrelated attitudes and behaviors that are normalized (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007). Pharr (1997) pointed out a direct connection between power and oppression. For instance, Pharr highlighted connections between all oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism), such as promoting a defined norm or “a standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all others are judged in relation to it” (p. 53), creating the other. The process of “othering” results in creating an unproductive dynamic perpetuated between dominant and oppressed groups as well as within and across oppressed groups that reinforces and promotes invisibility, distortions, stereotyping, blaming the victim, internalized oppression/self-hate, horizontal hostility, isolation, assimilation, tokenism, and individual solutions. Common elements such as these serve to maintain the economic power and control of a system by promoting the message of othering through media advertisements (e.g., negative or single-focused or a lack of representation of people of color, while the depictions of Whites are textured and widely varied on television shows and commercials) and in laws (marriage between a man and a woman with children results in a tax benefit). Imprinting the image of a group as against the norm or as the norm for the entire culture does determine whether a person is considered to be lacking, deviant, or not fully human. Or images are imprinted as sufficient and valued, as the standard of success, and almost superhuman. The imprint society has of a group leads to choices that determine whether people are deemed worthy enough to be
involved in decisions that affect their lives. The link between power and oppression limits the lives of all members of this society, but most especially marginalized groups. The dominant groups may not consciously feel the direct impact on them by having privilege, which results in having more power and control in their lives. And yet, they certainly have advantages from these bequeathed benefits, which ultimately have consequences that shape the dynamics of dialogue.

Peggy McIntosh’s (1997) well-known article “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” defined privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which [she could] count on cashing in each day” (p. 291). However, privilege goes beyond race and can include other identities in dominant society, such as being heterosexual, middle or upper class, or able-bodied (Watt, 2009). Raising awareness of diversity involves exploration on a personal and political level where one’s own privileged identities are considered in relation to racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and so on (Watt, 2007). Dialogue becomes emotionally charged because this type of exploration requires individuals to ask themselves a central human-life question—Who am I?—which necessitates fundamentally examining related questions such as, What do I believe? What was I taught? What is my truth? Whom do I love? How am I existing in this society? and What must I give up for the greater good? This interconnected examination naturally has the potential to raise complex feelings, such as rage, sadness, powerlessness, pride, joy, endearment, guilt, fear, and resentment, particularly for people who enjoy privileged identities. Engaging in emotionally charged, difficult dialogue with others about changing the climate of our higher education institutions is risky. As faculty, staff, and students it is risky to be involved in a process that not only requires an examination of professional and academic relationships where one’s livelihood/future is largely determined, but also necessitates revisiting and potentially deconstructing personal and familial relationships.

Logically, the angle taken to explore social oppression matters and contributes to the tension often present in the dialogue. For a marginalized identity, feelings of rage, powerlessness, and sadness might take center stage when examining change in social oppression, while for a privileged identity feelings of fear, entitlement, and defensiveness might come to the forefront. Attacking or defending privileged identity is often the kindling for difficult
dialogues (Watt, 2007). More specifically, contemplation of a marginalized identity may involve coming to terms with the reality that an immutable characteristic has influenced many social interactions, while struggling with the idea that if it were not for the psychological and structural restrictions endured, one might have been more successful in life. Consideration of a privileged identity might require one to reflect on what it means to leave the secure socialization of everyday interactions with the self, friends, and family that has reinforced agency in life, while also wrestling with whether one's position and status in society was truly earned. The paradoxes inherent in reflecting on one’s marginalized and privileged identity can stretch the mind and heart to their limits. The reflection can become even more mind-boggling and heart wrenching when complicated by the fact that many people’s complete identity likely comprises a mix of privileged and marginalized identities. These multiple identities as well as potential contemplations and considerations determine how one filters information while engaging in dialogue on organizational change. Conflict can arise because many of these campus community members come from different perspectives and may disagree on what is valued at the institution as well as the process used to change the organization.

It is important to recognize that discussions about diversity are extremely complex and are always situated in the context of historical and structural oppression; laced with multifaceted dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege; and deeply connected to personal and familial relational traditions that are central to identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Watt, 2009). These difficult dialogues are common when attempting to change the culture of an organization.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE PROCESS?

According to the American Council on Education, organizational change can be described as embracing ideas: “Change is deep, pervasive, intentional, and long term; it is organic and requires holistic and integrated thinking; and it entails new approaches to student affairs, faculty development, pedagogy, assessment, and community involvement” (as cited in Woodard, Love, & Komives, 2000, p. 61). Exploring meaningful questions in dialogue is a significant part of an organization’s transformation process. Sustaining
change involves talking about critical questions that reexamine basic assumptions campus members use in reaffirming or modifying policies and practices so that policies and practices align with the idea of diversity as a core value. This leads to behavior changes in faculty, staff, and students (Woodard et al.). As Lewin’s classic equation $B = f(P \times E)$ implies, higher education institutions are social systems made up of evolving human ($P$) and environmental ($E$) factors that interact ($\times$) and result ($f$) in behaviors ($B$) (as cited in Huebner & Lawson, 1990). Therefore, to embrace diversity as a value, institutions must use a process whereby behavior is (re)shaped and answers are organically discovered that are responsive to the evolving nature of these aspects of organizations. The use of effective oral and written communication among members of the campus community is central to this process. Finding ways to have productive dialogue about how to change the organization that balances thought with action involves campus community leaders’ nurturing certain key environmental conditions.

WHAT ARE THE KEY CONDITIONS NEEDED FOR A PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE?

For a higher education institution that has been established for many years, it is likely that there are many senior faculty who take pride in the intellectual community they have built, alumni whose financial giving is wrapped up in the institution’s carrying on certain traditions, knowledgeable staff who hold the institutional memory and have been dedicated to maintaining practices and procedures for decades, and students who are attending the institution because of its established reputation. It is difficult to simultaneously address the needs of each of these constituencies while questioning the institution’s foundation. Many opportunities for missteps and defensive behavior will probably arise during discussions about this type of organizational change (see Watt, 2009), and for the dialogue to derail while balancing these seemingly mutual values. Student affairs professionals need to be intentional about preparing the campus for the dialogue becoming difficult. Two conditions are essential in proactively setting up an environment for productive dialogue: mutual purpose and mutual respect (Patterson et al., 2002). In their book, Crucial Conversations, Patterson et al. discussed applying these conditions to personal as well as professional dialogue where risking or changing
relationships is at stake. The following sections include the basic principles of these conditions along with an explanation of why it is necessary to have these certain elements in the environment when intentionally examining the assumptions behind institutional practices that were adopted in a society where historical and structural social oppression is pervasive.

**Mutual Purpose**

In preparation for conversation about organizational change, campus leaders need to begin the process by creating a shared meaning of the end goal. Campus leaders must converse about the espoused and lived mission of the institution, reflect on the direction the organization needs to take, and develop a vision for the end goal, which can be clearly articulated to the entire campus. As campus leaders are developing this vision, they need to consult with the different representative groups (e.g., faculty, staff, alumni, students) and make sense of what it would mean for their campus to embrace diversity as a value. Establishing a shared meaning of the end goal is critical when preparing the environment for productive dialogue. A clear vision provides members of the community with the opportunity to make a decision about the role they can play in the organizational change. It also allows those who are not in alignment with the direction the institution is taking to make a fully informed decision about whether they can remain with the organization. A shared end goal of diversity as a value might mean the institution will create new practices that are very different for daily work of faculty, staff, and students. Changing job descriptions and creating new responsibilities is stressful under normal circumstances, but transition induced from a dissection of the institution’s values adds an additional layer of strain. In a situation that is already fraught with risk, it is critical that campus leaders consistently and transparently communicate their vision of the end goal and their best understanding of how that might affect individuals or constituency groups on campus. While the leaders may not be able to articulate the exact process for reaching the end goal, they must prepare the campus by persistently providing a shared meaning of their vision to the larger campus and acknowledging up front that the organic nature of the process will produce uncertainty at times.
Mutual Respect

Campus leaders need to support their words with actions that reassure campus community members that they will be treated fairly. Shifting the lens toward a focus on social oppression as the problem and away from a sole focus on how individuals experience racism, heterosexism, or ableism might engender fair treatment conditions. This lens allows those from privileged and marginalized groups to bear some responsibility for changing the foundational problem, whereas historically the burden for changing the organization in this way has largely been placed on the target group (e.g., people of color, gay men, or lesbians). Focus on addressing systemic change (racism, heterosexism, etc.) rather than helping individuals (those less fortunate) cope with oppression creates an environment in which all the constituents can come to the table with a contribution and a responsibility. To avoid dialogue that has an underlying message that campus community members are coming to this discussion, for instance, as “poor helpless Black people” or “mean and clueless White people,” campus leaders need to intentionally communicate the shared responsibility. They must also directly acknowledge the potentially different angles from which members of the community might approach the conversation. Moreover, creating conditions for potentially productive dialogue assumes a learning ethos. Learning ethos practices are guided by the assumption that each member comes to the table with goodwill as well as lessons to learn about the complex and interdependent nature of social oppression. And yet, those who are facilitating these dialogues need to handle gracefully the complications that will likely arise related to the ever present power dynamics that are inherent on a historical, social, and organizational level. Therefore, campus leaders must be intentional in thinking through and addressing the immediacy of the power, oppression, and privilege dynamics that exist between and within the relationships of campus constituents. An environment of learning ethos is more likely to occur when facilitators also pay attention to fundamental elements of relationship. Mutual respect is born out of attending to basic relational dimensions such as kindness; empathy; attention to the needs of others; and, most importantly, the capacity to allow colleagues and students to be who they are (marginalized and privileged) in the space of these dialogues. Finally, establishing a condition of mutual respect can also be achieved through the safety
and security of having a consistent structure for when and how these dialogues will take place.

ASKING AND NOT ANSWERING: USING MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS TO GUIDE ACTION

As Elie Wiesel (Winfrey, 2000) pointed out, questions and dialogue are natural partners. Posing a thoughtful question can invite dialogue as well as guide a community on a journey of exploration that unites everyone in a common cause. Higher education institutions today are experiencing an economic downturn that is affecting our nation, and budgets are being significantly cut for many programs and services on campus. It is difficult to proceed with exploring questions under these circumstances, especially questions that appear to have elusive answers, and participants must trust the answers will be revealed as they move through the process. Yet, there is no final answer to how to go about changing the policies and practices of a higher education institution when its foundation is built from the roots of social oppression that are part of our nation’s history. For that matter, faculty, staff, and students are part of an institutional and societal culture that requires change, and they may have difficulty thinking about transforming their campus climate while living in it. It might be said that it is like teaching fish how to see water. To teach campus community members to uproot socially unjust practices, they have to be invited to deconstruct their comprehension of power, oppression, and privilege as they relate to their institution. Deconstruction of this kind necessitates an active examination of the institutional and societal system that is informed from the marginalized and privileged perspectives. For these reasons investing more in a collaborative process of transformation by wrestling with meaningful questions that are at the foundation of the institution’s policies and practices is a constructive process toward discovering innovative ways the organization can embrace diversity as a value.

USING MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS AS A GUIDE

A productive strategy to explore complex issues that are complicated by historical and structural dynamics and include individuals’ investments in their
personal and social identities is to use meaningful questions as a catalyst. Meaningful questions, for the purposes of this chapter, are posed about a challenge that either has no answers or has potentially multiple answers. Posing these types of questions to invested constituents about matters at their institution requires group members to wrestle with an issue that brings in their personal and social investments as well as to consider the historical and structural dynamics.

Campus leaders need to use resources from the larger higher education community as well as their own campuses to construct a meaningful question to guide dialogue about organizational change on diversity matters. To start, campus leaders should consult the latest higher education literature for research findings that inform practical approaches to campus climate change. The literature might provide useful definitions of cultural competence, cultural climate, and research findings that measure the impact of the climate on the environment and on individual student experiences. Specific attention should be paid to reading about strategies of institutions that have experienced some success in addressing diversity matters. A meaningful question arises from the body of scholarly research as well as from the campus community’s best ideas about how to fit that information to its own environmental profile. A meaningful question invites campus community members to discuss the impact of social oppression on the environment in a way that moves the institution toward the change campus leaders envision. For example, meaningful questions might include, What is a diverse environment? What does that specifically mean for our campus? What would have to change for our community to interact in ways that overcome the impact of the historical and structural dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege in our society? How will our day-to-day practices change? How will we know we are making progress toward the cultural change we envision?

Discussing questions like these get to the source of the problem while guiding campus constituents toward new policies and practices. These questions fit the criterion of meaningfulness because they invite the campus community to a conversation with potentially multiple answers and no one right answer (discussed on p. 147 in Chapter 6). It also creates an opportunity for campus community members to ask themselves about their personal, professional, and social investments.

Once meaningful questions are constructed, campus leaders must decide on the process and forum to raise these queries. Raising a meaningful question that invites productive dialogue begins with vetting the question with
smaller diverse groups of faculty, staff, and students. This helps campus leaders know whether their question has considered the needs of the different experiences of those represented on their campus. Ultimately, campus leaders will need to raise these questions in an open invitation to the campus and provide multiple opportunities for participation. To be certain the structure provides the safety and security needed for productive dialogue, care should be taken to invite skilled facilitators from on campus or an off-campus consultant. Thoughtfully selecting the facilitators communicates the importance campus leaders are placing on organizational change. It also provides some assurance that conversations will not get derailed but rather provide outcomes in the shared vision. Finally, it is very important that campus leaders manage the process in transparent ways. Providing summaries that report the progress and outcome of these essential dialogues will help confirm that different voices were captured and heard by the campus community during the process of wrestling with these questions. Summary reports also provide a record of the progress made. These reports will be needed if the group becomes discouraged, which is a reasonable reaction to a task as difficult as changing the cultural climate. Reports also record the agreements and commitments made to produce change in the campus community, which will help the community maintain the change. Again as Elie Wiesel said, the questions and the quest for answers unite people and can create a movement toward change that enriches the lives of the entire campus community.

Using this process as an approach to organizational change efforts in diversity has three important components: It is informed by the latest scholarly work in the area of diversity, it is an inclusive process that demands active involvement of all voices on campus, and it takes precautions to help the dialogue to move toward action. While members of the campus community may not know the answer and are certainly not immune from making mistakes, they will likely feel more competent in wrestling with these difficult issues. At least the transparency of the process used to arrive at the chosen course of action engenders trust. It is liberating to engage in a process that changes an organization, improves the life of campus community members, and has an impact on a society. As Harro (2000) pointed out, feelings such as self-love, balance, joy, and security, all essential elements in educating college students as healthy and responsible citizens, are at the core of liberation.
To create environments that are socially just and that move beyond conversations about diversity being good toward living diversity as a value, faculty, staff, and students must be led by student affairs professionals who engage in difficult dialogues guided by meaningful questions and invite all parties to take personal responsibility and commit to take action. Chapter 6 offers examples of such dialogues and action.

REFERENCES


