

Sent: Friday, August 19, 2016 8:48 AM
To: hgse-all@list.gse.harvard.edu
Subject: [Hgse-all] Fulfilling the Promise of Diversity: Two Focus Areas for 2016-2017

Dear Friends,

Two years ago, we launched a community-wide conversation called *Fulfilling the Promise of Diversity*. The goal of this conversation was to bring our students, faculty, and staff together to address a topic that is central to the work of educators. Our premise was that embracing and cultivating diversity across a range of identities, experiences, and beliefs is a necessary starting point for our efforts as educators. But critical work remains to build and lead more diverse, equitable, and inclusive schools and organizations. In short, diversity offers great promise for our educational institutions, but truly fulfilling its promise requires going beyond the mere fact of diversity and creating the conditions for equity, belonging, and thriving.

Our Work from 2014 - 2016

The conversation began in 2014 with a common reading, events, workshops, new resources, and new courses that examined diversity through a variety of lenses. Although the conversation was well-received, it was clear that we needed to both continue and deepen our work in this area. In the second year, we looked to add more structure to the conversation by using a four-part “arc of learning” to better guide our activities. Through expanded coursework; changes to community-wide programming, including our new student orientation; ongoing professional development for faculty and staff; and the invaluable input from members of the community, *Fulfilling the Promise* has evolved from a conversation that ran parallel to our work to one that has become embedded in the HGSE experience.

The question we discussed this summer was how we should continue this work, and this conversation, in the coming year. There appears to be a general consensus that the conversation has been productive and should continue, and also that there is room for continued experimentation and refinement.

Two Areas of Deeper Focus in 2016-2017

As you know, diversity is a rich, big, and diverse topic, encompassing multiple aspects of identity, experience, and viewpoint. While the breadth of the topic is attractive in many ways, it can sometimes make it difficult to dig deeper and focus intently on particular issues that fall under this large umbrella. For this reason, we are going to experiment this year by focusing the conversation on two especially important issues facing education: **racial equity** and **viewpoint diversity**.

1. Promoting Racial Equity in Education

Race and racism, especially in the United States, have undoubtedly played a unique and deeply troubling role in determining access to education. Injustices on the basis of race and ethnicity – both overt and subtle – have their origins in our nation’s history and continue to undermine efforts at guaranteeing opportunity for all. At the same time, education has great potential to combat and reduce racism in society. As scholars and educators, without understanding the legacy of race and racism in education—and actions we can take to create more racially equitable institutions—we would be ignoring a matter of urgency for the nation and one for which many in society are rightly turning to

educators for guidance. Indeed, I believe that a key part of every student's education at HGSE should be exposure to the legacy of racism in education, its current manifestations, and tools to address it—tools that should prove useful to combat inequities faced by other groups. By focusing on the topic of racial equity within our community conversation, I believe that we can better prepare our students for the work that lies ahead and that we can, in our own way, advance the goal of racial equity in—and through—education.

2. Learning through Disagreement

As for the second focus area, I believe we can and should do more to prepare our students—and ourselves as faculty and staff—to have meaningful and respectful conversations and debates about education policy and practice across intellectual and political differences. We live in a time of increased polarization and weakened forms of public deliberation, including in the world of education. I believe it is imperative that we, as a professional educational school within a research university, dedicate ourselves to creating spaces that allow for brave communication and generous listening across a host of difficult, but not intractable, issues. No matter what positions we advocate for individually and collectively, we will benefit from experiencing and *practicing* discussion across intellectual and ideological divides. As HGSE's own Bob Kegan reminds us through his decades of work on adult learning and development, when we cannot hold our own viewpoints as objects of critical study, we are instead subject to them. That is, rather than “having” our viewpoints, they “have us.”

Planning and Activities for 2016-2017

Our work will look like it has in years past, but with a clearer and more intentional focus. Conversations will occur within courses and outside of the classroom, across a range of contexts and venues, from Askwith Forums to small discussion groups to faculty meetings and professional development groups. Our ultimate goal is to equip our students with two sets of skills that I believe will be critical to their future success as education professionals and leaders in a pluralist society. All educators must be able to recognize and be prepared to dismantle the racial injustices that plague our education system and societies. Similarly, all educators must be able to challenge their own beliefs and assumptions, listen genuinely to new ideas and opinions, engage respectfully in dialogue about areas of disagreement, and remain open to changing their minds. To me, the ability to equip students with these skills is the hallmark of a professional school that pursues social justice through intellectual bravery.

To be clear, none of this is to suggest that our conversations this year, whether inside or outside of class, will only address racial equity and viewpoint diversity. Nor is it to suggest that these are the only important topics within the larger field of diversity. For that reason, we will continue to host events and conversations about a range of topics related to fulfilling the promise of diversity, broadly defined to include multiple aspects of identity. That said, I do expect more focused offerings and programming this year that centers around making progress in these two areas in our courses, activities, and events. My hope is that we can organize a coherent and engaging set of experiences and, as a result, make greater progress toward our goals.

I look forward to sharing more information about the programs and events that will take place as part of our community conversation in the coming year. As always, your involvement, energy, and ideas will be critical to the success of our efforts. This is an on-going project and it is a collaborative one, the full shape of which will emerge over time and through learning from our mistakes and missteps along the way, which will undoubtedly occur. But if we enter this conversation, and this year, with good

will and in good faith dedication and commitment to the ultimate goals of this conversation, I hope and trust the effort will have been worthwhile.

Best,

Jim

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