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## SPECIAL REPORTS

# Hard Questions, Honest Answers

By *Maria A. Dixon Hall* | SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

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**A**merican colleges continue to invest good intentions — and millions of dollars — into diversity initiatives. Yet each year we are reminded that after decades of pursuing the ideal diversity program, we still haven't discovered what really works.

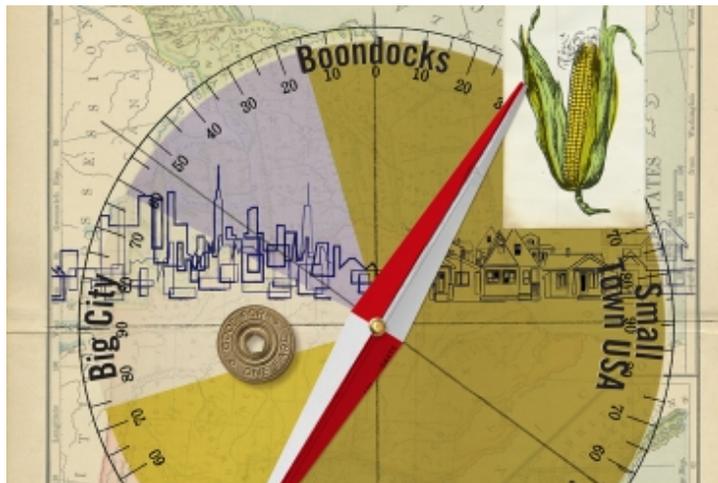
At my institution, Southern Methodist University, we are taking a chance on something different — an approach we call Cultural Intelligence at SMU (CIQ@SMU). We don't want our students and our faculty and staff members to simply "appreciate diversity." We want them also to effectively manage and communicate in diverse contexts, even when it means asking and responding to hard questions. We want to move beyond diversity to embrace the messy art of authentic conversations and relationships.

Higher education remains fixated on the number of people at the table (diversity) and the perception of how well they participate around the table (inclusion). Consequently, campus success is measured in admission rates, percentages of faculty of color, and the spectrum of color and gender in pictures that line the walls of our administration buildings and fill the pages of our official brochures.

## Location, Location, Location: The Geographic-Diversity Issue

In this special report, we look at diversity through a somewhat novel lens — that of geography. Our coverage examines how a college's location affects its mission, its ability to recruit students and faculty members, and its campus culture.

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Like other universities, SMU continues to push for more diversity in admissions and hiring. We are working hard to make sure our campus is more welcoming. However, we believe that efforts to welcome and include mean nothing if we lack the skills to effectively teach and learn together. Our cultural-intelligence initiative is aimed at moving beyond numbers, to focus on the nature of our working relationships.

Cultural intelligence, a concept developed by the scholars Soon Ang and Lynn Van Dyne, holds that human beings see one another through a mixture of cultural languages that affect their everyday interactions. While race, gender, and sexual orientation are influential, so are generational identity, geographic origin, professional status, religious commitment (if any), and political ideology.

This "identity stew" is at the heart of most stumbling blocks to living and working together on a college campus. Here's an analogy: When we travel to a new country, many of us, hoping to avoid being seen as the "ugly American," are willing to spend time learning the vocabulary and customs needed to successfully order dinner, navigate

transit, and engage with the locals. At SMU, our initiative argues that if we work to learn one another's "languages" as if we were travelers in foreign lands, we will be more successful in our campus interactions.

To achieve the lofty goal of knowing one another authentically, we have to talk about subjects in ways often seen as taboo on campuses. Our program encourages conversations among colleagues and students that, while civil, might be seen as politically incorrect. We invite people through online surveys and campus workshops to ask questions throughout the academic year about others' cultural identities, even if those questions might reinforce stereotypes. Among the questions asked so far: "If white people hate black people so much, why are you always trying to get darker?" "What is the difference between Koreans and Chinese?" "Why are black women so angry?" Such questions are guided by program facilitators, but they are not off-limits, and have led to some genuine conversations.

Simply asking these questions helped set the stage for "cultural exchanges" among peers, some student leaders said. "I am more willing to see a question about my culture now as a sincere question and not a possible insult," said one. "If I want people to know what respect looks like to me, I have got to be willing to let them ask the questions."

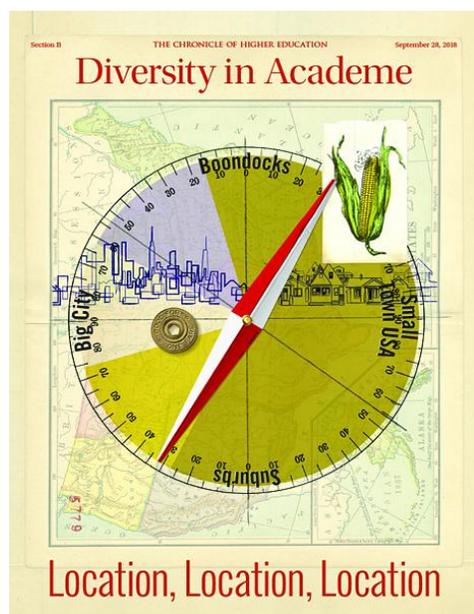
**S**ince fall 2017, every incoming student and faculty member is trained in cultural intelligence during orientation. Upperclassmen encounter the concept as a prerequisite for student leadership, Greek-life recruitment, and wellness courses. The cultural-intelligence initiative is also a key component of our academic searches, admissions efforts, faculty-leadership programs, and tenure-and-promotion policies. When interviewing faculty candidates, we are more attuned to the ways that implicit bias creeps into our decision making.

Our "Hidden Scripts" program, used in bias training, holds that each of us is guided in our everyday actions by a set of hidden scripts written by our unique cultural identities. The program teaches us to interrogate even our positive biases for particular colleges, advisers, or methodologies. Declarations of "best department fit" can mask factors that in reality reflect our biases at play.

We have chosen to leverage our existing assets instead of creating a diversity-program bureaucracy. Cultural-intelligence content is written, tested, delivered, and assessed by more than 120 faculty and staff members, students, and alumni. Existing offices work under the program's umbrella to develop consistent content that can be adapted to different communities, such as athletics, residential life, and a particular academic department.

One of the most important concepts of our program is that it disrupts an implicit assumption of traditional diversity programs: that all problems begin and end with bigoted, straight white men and women. The reality is that, outside of work, most of us live in homogenous ideological and cultural bubbles. Consequently, our program maintains that we all bring a cultural ignorance of others that can inhibit teaching and learning.

## Diversity in Academe



### Diversity In Academe: Location, Location, Location, Fall 2018

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As an African-American woman, I am well aware that this statement calls into question the validity of my "black card." During my 30 years in corporate America, the academy, and the United Methodist Church, in which I am a clergy member, I have endured nearly as many versions of diversity training. My own diversity work has involved working with the University of Oklahoma fraternity whose members were videotaped singing racist songs, with colleagues in the clergy trying to help their congregations respond to the changing racial demographics of their neighborhoods, and with a company that needs its work force of 30,000 people to move beyond the partisan divides of 2018.

I have come to realize that the game of shame, blame, weep, and vent has shut down real conversation and made diversity training seem like something to avoid. Frankly, if traditional diversity training really works, why are we still spending so much time and money ensuring compliance, rather than reaping the rewards of authentic community and embracing one another in friendship (or at least respect)? Why do we continue to experience violence, segregation, injustice, and inequity?

**T**his philosophy of asking and answering questions frequently perceived as culturally unacceptable has its detractors. Recently colleagues from inside and outside our university have publicly criticized our efforts. As *The Chronicle* has reported, we have been accused of perpetuating stereotypes, failing to adhere to the norms of academic research, and giving voice to the worst elements of our community.

My theologian's heart understands these concerns. But for too long we have believed that politeness and political correctness would rid us of bias and hatred on our campuses. Instead, the bias and hatred have merely clothed themselves in more socially acceptable terms.

Our cultural-intelligence program accepts a hard truth: You cannot change people's hearts with a program. You cannot shame people into a "nonbigoted" state, nor can you educate them to accept a utopian vision of universal solidarity. Our program says to our campus: Regardless of how you feel about the different people in this community, you will acquire the knowledge and skills to work with them effectively and respectfully.

I remain committed to CIQ@SMU because it reflects the complexity of the human soul. It refuses to promise a superficial conversion, and creates the foundation for genuine civil conversation.

We must acknowledge the attitudes about one another that we wear like jagged scars — attitudes that make us point fingers and say, "You are overreacting," or "You just don't get it."

At SMU, we know that real change cannot occur if our students and faculty members cannot collaborate with one another, much less with the world around them. After all, it is impossible to change the world if you are unable to talk to everyone in it.

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*This article is part of:*

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