Commitment to DIVERSITY

SU encourages a rich mixture of ideas and talents to create innovative thinkers with an understanding and appreciation of today’s global society

By Kathleen M. Haley
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REVEREND THOMAS V. WOLFE G’02 shares a simple story of inclusion and respect. In 2002, the Hendricks Chapel dean traveled to Spain with chaplains, faculty, staff, and students as part of a University Vision Fund grant to explore a historical place where Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived in unity. The participants—representing all three traditions—set out to gain an understanding of each other’s faiths in a region of the country where, from the 8th to 15th centuries, a cultural renaissance of religious peaceful coexistence flourished. The first night in Toledo, Spain, the group gathered at a restaurant where a long table had been set up with customary bottles of wine. The Imam and the Muslim students discreetly set up a table for themselves in observation of their belief that they cannot eat at a table where alcohol is served. In response, the group had the wine taken away. “The table was then complete,” Wolfe says. “This is the kind of sensitizing experience that develops understanding. We have to cross boundaries and build diplomacy.”

Wolfe sees the example as part of a larger ideal as to why people need to acknowledge their differences, learn to respect them, and find ways to come together. “Diplomacy, which is based on relationships, is our only chance for the future,” Wolfe says. “We need people who are committed to diversity and regard war as a failure of our ability to communicate across uncomfortable lines, so we can have a conversational world—not free of differences of opinion, but with people standing side by side respectfully.”

Making a place for everyone to express differences allows for a pluralistic, democratic culture, where every individual’s contributions are valued and a community is enriched by varied points of view. People feel
free to share ideas and collaborate, building intellectual and social capital—critical to finding common ground in times of strife and to thriving in the global marketplace. SU is committed to creating an environment that embraces the full spectrum of society’s diverse population and where everyone can learn and succeed. Students hail from all 50 states and more than 100 countries. In the 2005-06 academic year, about 24 percent of SU’s student population was composed of students of color and international students. Talented students with limited financial means or from traditionally underrepresented groups are encouraged to attend the University through a variety of recruitment programs. Once here, student retention is an important part of the University’s work. Student support services, mentoring programs, and offices focused on specific populations provide support and advocacy. The University also engages the entire population of students, faculty, and staff with opportunities to interact on diversity issues through academic offerings, intergroup dialogues, community engagement, residence hall programming, and University-wide lectures and forums. Student organizations supply diverse programming and social outlets for students to experience other cultures, views, and expressions. “We all bring something to the intellectual table,” says James Duah-Agyeman G’99, director of student support and diversity education and the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA). “Students gain from sitting and studying together with others of diverse backgrounds. Diversity matters professionally, academically, and personally—it makes all of us stronger.”

On a diverse campus, students learn and grow by exploring a range of ideas and engaging others. “The reason to go to college is to understand the world,” philosophy professor Linda Martin Alcoff says. “We want to help students understand their world, so they can develop their own opinions and participate in democracy.” One of the best ways for students to experience diversity of thought is by taking SU’s new courses in intergroup dialogue that allow students to build trust and discuss stereotypes and divisive societal issues. Led by facilitators, these courses—Intergroup Dialogue on Race and Ethnicity and Intergroup Dialogue on Gender—are part of a collaborative research project with several other universities (see related story, page 27). Nichelle Rothong ’07 participated in the race and ethnicity course. “I learned to dialogue about my feelings, actively listen to oth-
ers, and examine my own beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about diversity,” Rothong says. “I learned how to analyze my behavior and thinking in situations with people of different races and ethnicities, and the importance of talking about diversity and other social issues in order to grow as a person, as well as to better relate to others.”

The University also encourages students to explore diversity through scholarship in action, immersing themselves in the professions and the community to learn and test ideas. “Our vision of scholarship in action is fertile ground for the kinds of intellectual and social experiences that facilitate working in groups and easily shifting from culture to culture,” Chancellor Nancy Cantor says. “It is also a commitment to community and having a sense of responsibility and pleasure from being embedded in a diverse world.”

As an example, Cantor cites the South Side Entrepreneurial Connect Project, which joins faculty and students with businesses and entrepreneurs in the nearby Syracuse neighborhood. The program seeks to build sustainability among businesses and support growth through training, resources, and loans to women and minority entrepreneurs. Another community collaboration involves a partnership between SU and the Syracuse City School District that draws together pre-existing relationships to strengthen curriculum and support such programs as literacy through the arts, in which middle and high school students work with SU students and faculty to use various media to document their lives and incorporate their own writing. “We are doing our core mission of tapping talent and working collaboratively on the most pressing issues of the day,” Cantor says. “If we address all of those with a full range of talent, we will have addressed questions of diversity in their most central form.”

SU emphasizes diversity to prepare students for the world as well as to impact society, so that when they graduate, students can communicate with diverse groups of people and become active participants in their communities. “One thing executives from multinational corporations tell us is that they value the ability of employees to work in groups, share intellectual capital, and create a vibrant environment based on difference adding more, rather than homogeneity,” Cantor says. “Diversity is about talent, creativity, citizenship, and community. It’s at the center of what SU is about: a rich mixture of people and ideas that will create opportunity and change.”

Expanding Understanding

In defining our differences, society tends to compartmentalize us by creating neat categories, such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, but communication and rhetorical studies professor Amardo Rodriguez believes those static models are no longer relevant. “There are national, global, and existential forces bearing down on us that are making for new and highly dynamic interpretations and definitions of diversity,” he says. Immigration, market globalization, emerging technologies, and families with members of different religions and cultures are creating a more intricately diverse society. He expands on such ideas in the classroom and in his books, including Diversity as Liberation (II): Introducing a New Understanding of Diversity (2002). “Our differences are of a much more complex and fluid nature than such matters of race, ethnicity, and sexuality,” Rodriguez says. “They involve matters of histories, sensibilities, rationalities, and spiritu-

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alities. We need models of diversity that put the emphasis on the increasing ways that diversity is emerging as a verb between peoples.”

Rodriguez’s classes are among more than 350 diversity-related courses offered through a wealth of academic programs, including African American studies, women’s studies, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies, Native American studies, and religion and society studies. “A great university challenges you on how you view the world and how you think,” says Barry L. Wells, senior vice president and dean of student affairs. “Infusing diversity in the curriculum is the best way for students to develop an understanding and an appreciation of how to live in a global society.”

Education professor Kal Alston prepares future teachers to face classrooms of children who may be very different from themselves. “In the United States, more than 50 percent of K-12 teachers are white women,” says Alston, who is also associate provost and has joint faculty appointments in the School of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences. “Teachers-in-training have very good intentions, but many may not have much experience with other races or other classes. I try to have them understand themselves as part of a community, a country, and a world, and that their experience is not the only experience.” Teachers impart content that is relevant to society and diverse groups of people, and students recognize the importance of learning material that will prepare them for their life’s work. Law student Rafiel
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Warfield G’08 sees the value in classroom content that reflects society as a whole. “It is necessary for the University to expose students to subjects that they would not normally encounter, and other individuals, beliefs, ideas, and cultures, so that there is an awareness of the broader world,” Warfield says. “In the legal profession, I have to be able to adapt and address differences in people to ensure that justice is served equally, despite and in light of those differences.”

To create a diverse curriculum, a university needs faculty diverse in backgrounds and thought. About 20 percent of SU’s 865 full-time instruction- al faculty are from historically underrepresented groups. The University Senate Committee for Diversity is focusing on hiring and retaining more faculty of color. “There’s been a tremendous effort to hire faculty of color, but that effort is useless if we’re not able to retain those faculty members,” says Alcoff, committee co-chair. “In some cases, there may need to be changes in structural procedures, including the tenure, promotion, and review processes.”

Critical Endeavor

Why is there still a need to create diverse communities and construct settings for people to experience differences? “We have not gotten to a place where everyone has equal access and equal opportunity based on their talents and merits,” Alston says. “At the university level, overall, you could say women have equal access and, at SU, we have a female chancellor and deans. But it’s not just a matter of counting. It’s a matter of systematically looking through an organization to see where barriers to access exist.” A university is obligated to bring down those barriers, whether they’re economic, cultural, or other factors that impede equality. “There is a segregated housing market in this country, and our students come largely from segregated communities, whether wealthy, middle-class, or low-income,” Wells says. “When you come to an environment where people from different backgrounds are expected to get along, it’s a challenge for traditional age college students. Some embrace the experience and some have a difficult time.” For prospective students who look into life at SU, it shouldn’t be a surprise in what they find here. “If diversity interests students, then Syracuse might be the place for them,” Wells says. “If not, they need to think twice about attending a university that places great value on it.”

The university setting provides an atmosphere of exploration and creates spaces for conversations that may be difficult to construct elsewhere. “People of like interests, religions, race, etc., tend to isolate themselves more than diversify,” says Horace H. Smith G’70, associate vice president of undergraduate studies and academic affairs in the Division of Student Support and Retention (SSR). “Unless you consciously encourage an amalgam of these differences, there’s a natural tendency to pull away from diversity. An institution of higher education has a responsibility to seek what has yet to be accomplished.” History and international relations student Jarell Corley ’08 believes it is important for the University to continue creating opportunities to explore differences. “As students see that the campus is committed to diversity, they will become more aware of it,” Corley says. “They will be able to come out of their comfort zones.”

Supporting Talent

As SU continues to build a diverse campus, it also helps prepare talented high school students who may need extra academic support to get to college. Through SSR, SU participates in such programs as New York’s Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. SU also provides assistance to qualified students, who may not have the financial ability to enter college, through the Higher Education Opportunity Program and other initiatives (see related story, page 24).

The University’s emphasis on recruiting a diverse student population made great strides in 2005 as 24.6 percent of the first-year class consisted of students of color—compared with 17 percent from the previous year. In a national context, SU was recognized for its inclusiveness by The Chronicle of
Higher Education, which ranked Syracuse among the top private institutions that are making college affordable for low-income students. Syracuse ranks fifth among the top 59 private institutions with its high percentage of Pell Grant recipients—19.4 percent in the 2004-05 academic year. The federal grant is based on financial need. “Syracuse is rightly cited as a place that has tried very hard to deliver on the reality of diversity, in a range of socio-economics at various institutions.”

As students from traditionally underrepresented groups begin their studies at SU, they are welcomed by a support system of programs and offices designed to meet their needs and are encouraged by staff members eager to help them. For underrepresented students not supported by HEOP or other government-funded programs, SU offers WellsLink, a mentoring program for first-year students administered by OMA that provides professional development, networking opportunities, and leadership exploration. OMA offers further opportunities for all students of color, including academic support, mentoring, and a women’s support group, and organizes the Multicultural Family Affair Reception and Multicultural Senior Reception. “We want OMA to be a home away from home,” says Autrey, director of OMA.

**Building Common Ground Through Intergroup Dialogues**

Students are challenging social inequalities, developing communication skills, and learning to collaborate for the common good as part of two new courses on intergroup dialogue. Cross-listed by sociology and women’s studies, the courses—Intergroup Dialogue on Race and Ethnicity and Intergroup Dialogue on Gender—began in fall 2005 and aim to teach students about creating societal change. Through trained facilitators, students participate in frank discussions on controversial issues on campus and in society. “We spend about five to six weeks building trust among the students to create a safe space where they will feel comfortable talking,” says James Duah-Agyeman G’99, director of student support and diversity education and the Office of Multicultural Affairs, who co-facilitates the race and ethnicity class with education instructor Judy Hamilton G’00. “We get strong conversations going. It’s invigorating.”

The courses are part of the three-year Multiversity Intergroup Dialogue Project, which is administered by the University of Michigan and includes Syracuse and eight other higher education institutions. “The researchers want to understand the educational benefits of intergroup dialogue,” says education professor Gretchen Lopez, project director for SU and faculty associate for diversity. “We want to learn how intergroup dialogue allows students to think about their own and others’ social identities in the context of inequality, how it affects communication skills, and the long-term impact on students’ campus and civic engagement.”

As part of the courses, students are assigned multidisciplinary readings, keep journals about their experiences, and participate in activities and small group projects, but the peer-to-peer learning is the most crucial part of student discovery. “We know from earlier research that intergroup dialogue is an effective method for teaching students about diversity and how to deal with difference and build common ground,” Lopez says. “Dialogue also allows opportunities for self-reflection and growth.”

Jin Hen Kim ’09, a member of the race and ethnicity class, found the experience revealing through talking about issues without being limited by political correctness. In one conversation, students discussed whether certain minorities that appear to be doing well economically are still at a disadvantage and should be part of affirmative action. Some students contended that those minority populations are still impacted by discrimination in the workforce and their incomes must be examined alongside numbers of household occupants and the higher cost of living where they reside. Because of this, the students believed they should be included in affirmative action. “This is a matter of education,” Kim says. “By talking about such issues, we can develop new ways of thinking.” Building trust among the students was key to exploring stereotypes and confronting prejudice, at times addressing hate speech and derogatory remarks common in society. “Even though we discussed issues that might be uncomfortable to talk about, at the end of the day, we were all friends because we had built that respectful environment,” he says. “We all came away knowing what each other thought, and that’s a step forward.”

In addition to students, SU staff members are participating in dialogue circles as part of the Office of Human Resources’ mission to create a respectful workplace. Participants meet once a week for six weeks to discuss racism, reconciliation, and responsibility. The program started last spring and continued with groups during the summer and fall. “The dialogue circles provide an opportunity to talk about racism in its many forms,” says Curlene Autrey, director of diversity and resolution processes. “The objective is to increase awareness and think of ways to come up with positive change.”
home for our students,” Duah-Agyeman says.

SSR, which provides assistance to pre-college students, also supports students during their time at SU. “Every student who comes to this University has the potential to graduate in any field of study,” Horace H. Smith says. “Our task is to facilitate that process.” Among its many roles, SSR oversees the Tutoring and Study Center and the Office of Disability Services (ODS). ODS works to ensure that students with disabilities receive equal access to academics and all other aspects of University life. Services include providing alternative formats for academic materials, addressing issues of accessibility in collaboration with other campus offices, educating the campus community, and working with various constituencies to promote equal access. ODS services respond to the diversity of learning styles and levels of ability. “Students with disabilities want to participate on an equal basis with everyone else in the classroom,” says Stephen H. Simon G’71, ODS director. “But our traditional way of teaching may require creative changes, so that the same academic goals and requirements are met, but through alternatives that reflect the needs of every student.”

Such centers as the Lillian and Emanuel Slutzker Center for International Services and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center support students through safe spaces, education, and advocacy. The Slutzker center assists international students and scholars with visas and other credentials necessary to study in the United States. It sponsors many activities, including English conversation groups, a Thanksgiving dinner in collaboration with Hendricks Chapel, and weekly seminars on such topics as travel and employment. Among its offerings, the LGBT Resource Center provides support services, discussion groups, resources, social activities, and educational outreach programs.

Although there are specialized services for distinct groups, all of these offices serve all students through programming and learning opportunities. “Our services go beyond the specific population we serve,” says Adrea L. Jaehnig, director of the LGBT Resource Center (see related story, page 18). “We have partnerships across campus so every part of the institution understands the issues that LGBT students face. We work to create access for LGBT students into all areas of the institution.” For example, LGBT Resource Center staff members worked with Newhouse professor Steve Davis and his news writing and editing classes to produce an issue of The Student Voice devoted solely to the LGBT campus community. Jaehnig shared information with students about developing sensitivity toward covering LGBT issues to increase student-reporter knowledge and comfort levels during interviews. “You will never learn everything you need to know about every kind of culture or person in this world,” Jaehnig says. “But, as a journalist, if you can develop an approach that is sensitive, sensible, and respectful to those who are different from you, you will get more of the story.”

Faith leaders at Hendricks Chapel are a source of support for the diversity of religious traditions at SU, and the chapel is a place for all communities to gather. Wolfe notes the importance of having an interfaith gathering place in times of need, such as during the aftermath of 9/11. “This was a specific place where the University community could come together,” Wolfe says. “In that instance, all three Abrahamic traditions were represented in prayers, spoken words, and readings. That collective response was the most natural thing because our chaplains had already done the work of relationship building.”

Student groups, including cultural, ethnic, and religious organizations, bring together people with like interests and others to learn about those different from themselves. “People will agree we have a diverse student body statistically, but many students are uncomfortable connecting with others outside of their own groups,” Wells says. “The University provides the vehicle, but students then have to make the decision to open themselves up to interaction and dialogue.” During the last academic year, Bryan Jacobson ’06 and members of his fraternity, Sigma Alpha Mu, collaborated with other Greek houses to host a discussion on race. “We need people interacting,” Jacobson says. “It’s important to learn about others and develop empathy and understanding of people who aren’t like you.”

The University encourages collaboration among student organizations, academic departments, faculty, staff, and students by offering grants for joint programming on diversity topics. “When the University says it values diversity, then it needs to demonstrate it,” Wells says. “The best way to do that is to work with the students, organizations, and departments that have the ideas and vision and help make it happen.” The Division of Student Affairs Grants for Diverse Programming offer funding to organizations that collaborate with other groups on diversity programs, and the Irma Almirall-Padamsee La Fuerza Community Enhancement Award recognizes seniors who have helped create dialogue among people from diverse cultural groups. Another award, the Chancellor’s Feinstone Grants for Multicultural Initiatives, funds programming that advances the University’s dialogue on cross-ethnic relations and develops alliances across ethnic identities. The spring 2006 awards included funding for students to spend a week in New Orleans to help with Hurricane Katrina relief efforts and also reflect on such systemic societal issues as environmental racism. One of the most moving things the group did was tour the city’s lower ninth ward, an area of many
minority communities located close to landfills and chemical plants, where little work was taking place due to the extent of the destruction, says Reverend Kelly Sprinkle, chaplain of Hendricks Chapel’s Protestant Campus Ministry, who organized the trip. “Students had been working in other areas that primarily consisted of middle-class African American homes,” Sprinkle says. “They thought the devastation had been bad, but during the tour, they saw places that were wiped out.” Students also learned the stories of the people and provided hope, while bonding as a group. “The goal was to put together a diverse student team of different races and faith experiences,” Sprinkle says. “We lived and worked together, creating opportunities for conversation.”

Live and Learn

One of the best places for students to reap the benefits of diversity is in their residence halls. The Office of Residence Life (ORL) engages students through programming and hall-wide functions. During the 2005-06 academic year, resident advisors (RAs) organized more than 330 multicultural programs, attended by more than 6,900 students. The programs included a Latin Night celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month; a presentation on Jewish culture by a local rabbi; and a viewing and discussion of Boys Don’t Cry, a movie that focuses on gender identity. “A lot of creativity comes out when you give RAs the expectations and freedom,” says ORL director Rebecca Reed Kantrowitz.

From day one, residence life staff members set the tone for respectful living through the No Place for Hate Campaign. Students sign a banner in support of the campaign and attend floor meetings at which RAs reinforce those ideals. ORL backs up its efforts with an active bias-related incident protocol, which quickly addresses such incidents or hate crimes, and possible disciplinary action or a response by the Department of Public Safety. “Over the past two years, we have seen a reduction in the number of bias-related incidents,” Kantrowitz says. “The results say to us the protocol has made an impact on students knowing what is unacceptable.”

Through residence life and OMA, students can immerse themselves in diversity at the Multicultural Living and Learning Community. Students experience residential living that integrates identity development and multicultural communication with faculty assistance. For other students interested in exploring diversity, the Conversations About Race and Ethnicity (CARE) Program allows for discussions on diversity-related issues in small group settings with trained facilitators. The program is a collaborative project with the InterReligious Council of CNY, which has held its own community-wide dialogue circles for several years. Since CARE’s inception last fall, more than 200 students have participated in the six-week program. “We hope at the end of the program that students have a better sense of who they are and a better sense of the complexities of diversity,” Kantrowitz says. “We want them to see how they can build bridges and possibly in the future go into the community to facilitate dialogues at high schools.”

Students who participated in CARE or the intergroup dialogue courses say they were invigorated by the experiences and would like more such opportunities. “Syracuse is very good at talking about diversity and creating a diverse student body,” says Jacobson, who participated in the race and ethnicity dialogue course. “But, in talking about it, we get caught up in the issues, and we don’t focus on the fact that we want people of different colors to get along and be comfortable with each other. That’s what the positive side of diversity is all about—interaction.”

SU is creating those opportunities to interact and continuing to build diversity on campus. Within that enriched setting of shared experiences among people with different perspectives, the intellectual community thrives. “When we, as a University, tap the full talent pool and bring it to our table, then we create the most vibrant, educational environment possible,” Chancellor Cantor says. “One of the most compelling things I hear from alumni is that SU gave them an opportunity, and they made the most of it. Diversity is at the very spirit of this University, as a place where opportunity and excellence are intertwined.”