

# DAC Newsletter:

## Diversity in the Classroom

**In August 2013**, Diversity Action Committee offered a workshop in Inter Group Relations (IGR), with over 50 participants from all three Schools. IGR is a pedagogical model developed at the University of Michigan, which explicitly focuses on the relationship between social conflict and social justice, and which teaches students, faculty and staff to proactively learn about the complexities of living in a multicultural society. This coming May, DAC is offering IGR training for a small group of faculty and administrators who will be able to offer IGR courses at Siena College in the future.

**But, we might ask, does diversity in the classroom matter?** What are some of the challenges faculty might face in their classrooms as they attempt to establish a diverse environment? In this week's Newsletter, two committee members reflect on these issues.

### **Perundevi Srinivasan, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies:**



The ideal classroom that I visualize is one that is marked by participants' mutual respect for each other and with the spirit of critical inquiry. One challenge that I find in teaching materials on "Eastern" religions is that with some students I need to work really hard in breaking through their ethnocentric assumptions or worldviews. In my first semester at Siena, as I was showing some pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses in my 100 level course, a few students made remarks such as "awful," "weird," and "strange." This experience taught me that I should work hard to cultivate greater intercultural appreciation among such students. I employ the following methods toward this goal: I emphasize in my lecture that they need to adapt an ethnorelativist framework toward religions and cultures in a multicultural world to live a meaningful life; I engage in dialogue with such students in and outside the classroom to help them open their minds; and I often ask their peers to discuss their comments and respond to them immediately. Being part of the Diversity Action Committee has helped me to connect with faculty and students who are familiar with such classroom situations, and to learn from them how to improve my pedagogical practices so that together with my students I can build our ideal classroom.

**Mohammad Javaheri, Assistant Professor of Mathematics:**

As a member of the Diversity Action Committee, I hope to increase awareness of diversity issues among science students and faculty. I believe that the School of Science is committed to foster a fair and encouraging atmosphere for women and minorities, and its intellectual personality depends on it. Diversity awareness leads to increase in creativity and innovation, and higher student and faculty retention. A multicultural and diverse environment has become an essential college experience that broadens students' perspectives and prepares them for today's diverse workplaces. One must realize that diversity is not an end but a means of achieving our goals as a higher education institution in the Franciscan tradition that values and respects all of its members.

It is as challenging as necessary to make science and mathematics education accessible and inviting to all students. Many of our students might lack a sense of belonging to science and math classrooms because of their gender, race, etc. The great mathematician Paul Erdos considered and practiced mathematics as a social activity, and one can encourage learning, group work, and student collaboration in the context of such a social activity by making it pleasant, inclusive, and welcoming to all students. Science and mathematics, like other disciplines, are motivated and elevated by personal experiences, and recognizing that different backgrounds bring different personal experiences can prove useful in learning and problem solving as well as research-oriented settings.



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**If you are interested in contributing to our ongoing discussion about diversity in the classroom and the curriculum, consider being nominated to serve on DAC. Nominations for our upcoming elections are due on March 24.**