

# Conversations in Black

## The Race Relations Project aims to bridge a cultural divide

.....

In the best-selling book “Blink,” Malcolm Gladwell recounts that after taking a Race Implicit Association Test (IAT), he was horrified to learn that he had a “moderate automatic preference for whites”—especially since he is half black. And he was not alone. Seventy percent of those who took the Race IAT at <http://www.implicit.harvard.edu> had an automatic preference for white people. How could that be, considering that “diversity training” has been around since the 1960s?

“We’ve noticed that we’ve created a generation of politically correct people who have learned that the way to talk about race is not to talk about it,” said Dr. Sam Richards, senior lecturer in sociology and co-director with Dr. Laurie L. Mulvey of the Race Relations Project at Penn State. “Or if that can’t be avoided, simply make sure you don’t offend others.”

According to Richards and Mulvey, our good intentions often do not translate into bridging the vast cultural divide that we meet and perpetuate day-to-day. Given the

demographics of Pennsylvania, say the pair, the majority of Penn State’s students and employees still live in a world predominantly segregated by race, and most still have little practice building relationships across the color lines.

Richards and Mulvey are trying to change that with the Race Relations Project (RRP). Founded in the spring of 2002 with a seed grant, the project trains undergraduate students to facilitate Socratic conversations with their peers and Penn State staff on the topic of race relations.

### Navigating Uncomfortable Territory

Last year, more than 7,000 students and staff participated as part of course requirements, extra credit, club activities or personal interest. The participants signed up for a 90-minute session with eight to 10 others and two co-facilitators. In the sessions, individuals talk about their personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes toward race. The facilitators guide the group through what can often be challenging and uncomfortable territory, while



# and White

By KAREN WING

maintaining an atmosphere of respect.

In last fall's evaluations, 85 percent of the participants felt the conversations were worthwhile, and more than 98 percent felt that the undergraduate facilitators made them feel that they could express their views.

According to Richards and Mulvey, the mission of the project is not to tell people how they should think, as in diversity training, but to give participants the opportunity to come to their own conclusions through discussion.

"What I've seen with our work is that this type of experience leads participants to develop personal beliefs and personal understandings that they can own," said Mulvey. "And I think this ownership must be present in order for individuals to move past polite gestures of tolerance and to move toward the elements of true community."

## Making an Impact

In the Eberly College of Science, every student (approximately 700 each year) is encouraged to participate in the RRP. "Across the board in the sciences, we're trying to address the challenge of increasing the percentages of underrepresented populations," said Dr. Karin Foley,

associate dean of the Eberly College of Science. "It's a national problem, and it's a problem at Penn State. We're working hard to correct it."

Robert Snyder, director of administrative services and special programs in the Office of Student Aid, has also invited the RRP to work with his staff of 60. "Diversity means different things to different people, and in our office we work with a broad spectrum of the population," he said. "I think it's important for us to gain a better understanding of where students are coming from. I think RRP facilitators helped us toward that goal."

Brittany Berman, a 2006 graduate in public relations and sociology, was a facilitator in the project for two years. "The Race Relations Project gives people a forum to openly talk about a subject that society considers to be taboo—race," she said. She added that the experience factored into her acceptance of a job to be a youth commissioner, through AmeriCorps, in which she plans to engage young people in the community. "This project has inspired me to keep people talking and to always promote an atmosphere that harvests this type of personal, interactive dialogue."

For more information on the Race Relations Project, visit <http://www.racerelationsproject.psu.edu>. ▀



Drs. Sam Richards and Laurie L. Mulvey run an initiative that encourages people to talk openly about race.

Fred Weber—Campus Photography