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DWELLING IN DISCOMFORT

Ken Koltun-Fromm, Religion Department, Haverford College

How can we imagine a discipline as open, inclusive, welcoming, and inspiring for students who already feel distant from an elite, white culture? This was just one of the questions that Amaka Eze—a Bryn Mawr senior philosophy major and Africana Studies minor—and I—a white, Jewish, male Haverford professor—sought to answer in our semester together studying the Religion Department curriculum. We wanted to analyze and assess the structural and substantive ways the Religion Department invites and excludes under-represented, under-resourced, and first-generation students in our classes and our major. To do this, we set out a process to gather student input from focus groups, to assess faculty comments about what they do in the classroom to make it more inclusive, and finally to mediate a discussion between students and faculty about what a truly welcoming department might look like, and how belonging to it might transform how we think about a liberal arts education.

Amaka collected stories from students and faculty about inclusive pedagogy. She reached out to and met a number of majors and non-majors to assess how they think about the department, how they learn about educational models that most attracted them, and to hear concerns about inclusivity and openness. Amaka and I met at regular intervals to talk about what she was hearing and to create an action plan for the department. That plan took the form of four concrete steps: 1) revise how we represent the major to prospective students, and consider adding a fourth “independent” track to our current three, because it is simply unclear how students should navigate through the curriculum; 2) integrate more opportunities for critical writing within all courses, incorporate scaffolded writing assignments, and create more student-to-student, as well as professor-to-student, feedback on assignments; 3) take time to get to know students and allow them to get to know us as faculty; and 4) grant students more collaborative control over the syllabus and their own learning. The department was quite receptive to all four suggestions, and I am currently working with another Bryn Mawr senior, Kameice Francis, to revise our website and the way we present the major (point #1 above). We hope this will be a more transparent approach to curricular development, enabling students to navigate through a now-accessible curriculum.

But what I learned from this process was far more valuable than the recommendations that Amaka and I forwarded to the department. Those recommendations were indeed effective, and they fit well within a growing demand at colleges and universities worldwide for more data, programs, and “outcomes” to respond to the diversity of students in higher education. But the real hard work comes in building trust in conversation with vulnerable others. I have been in conversations about diversity with peers and colleagues, and I often leave frustrated and disappointed because we only position and perform an expertise before each other. We try to show how much we know, how much we experience, how well we use language to identify racism, or white fragility, or exclusionary practices. But what we don’t do is build trust to open ourselves to be transformed. That takes time, energy, commitment, and hard work. I know this to be true because I often responded in that more defensive posture to Amaka—unwilling to make myself vulnerable to criticisms that I deemed unfair. I was not prepared to be open and trusting. I

was startled, shocked, and not a little hurt. Amaka thinks I'm too thin-skinned. She's right—but I would have it no other way.

I have always thought that being thin-skinned was a particular vice that I would rather shed: be tougher, take it standing up, sleep well at night because I know where I stand. But we really cannot engage in issues of diversity and inclusion if we are thick-skinned in these kinds of ways. Those hardened layers function as barriers to inclusivity and belonging.

Being thin-skinned means being porous, but above all it means living with discomfort. There is discomfort in talking about race, in experiencing exclusion, in recognizing privilege. Neither professors nor students like to reveal that discomfort, or even label it when we see it. But lingering in discomfort, even for just a little bit longer, is worth the risk. And that, ultimately, is what I did with Amaka that spring semester. We took risks that we were not completely prepared for. That is why the work of diversity and inclusion is so hard. You can assess and deliver outcomes all day long. But risking discomfort? Now that is something worthy of a liberal arts education. We should all have skin in that game.

Student Partner's Perspective: *Amaka Eze, Bryn Mawr College '19*

My partnership with Ken was in many ways the culminating experience of my time as an undergraduate student consultant. The goal of our work together was to address issues of diversity, inclusion, and access within the Religion Department curriculum, and we did this through a series of evaluations and open conversations with religion students. In retrospect, the most illuminating aspects of this experience were the relational dynamics that emerged between Ken and me, and the ways in which those interpersonal dynamics articulated larger, systemic themes identified through the departmental project.

Our relationship involved constant adjustment and communication due to the multi-faceted nature of the project. Learning to trust in one another's expertise and commitment was central to achieving our goals, but building this trust necessitated transparency and vulnerability. Enacting this openness proved complicated as I felt the reality of professor-student power differentials further manifest. On a personal level, I needed to name the weight of these dynamics and the ways in which I saw them inflect my engagement in the partnership.

For Ken, it seemed that he too needed to more radically open himself to the space of vulnerability and transparency. Those structural issues of diversity, inclusion, and access needed to become more real to us, relationally. By leaning in to the discomfort of our relationship, and of our very different positionalities, Ken and I were able to better identify systemic issues within the department and propose new channels for authentic collaboration.