

November 2018

Dialogue on Diversity



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-Annette Watters, M.A.Ed.,
Diversity Outreach Project Manager, Purdue University

Dialogue On Diversity, a conversation with leaders in the field of diversity and inclusion, is designed to help better understand the issues they face in today's challenging times. This month, Annette Watters talks about her background, her challenges on campus and how The Defamation Experience helped provide *"a safe space for the audience to grapple with hot-button and polarizing issues in a manner that is engaging and conducive to learning."*

Q: Please tell us about your background and what prepared you for your current role.

A: I completed my undergraduate work at Millikin University in Decatur, IL where I majored in Communication with a minor in Psychology. I earned these degrees while I worked as a full-time employee of the University. During my tenure at Millikin, I worked in a variety of areas ranging from the Office of the Dean of Students to Residence Life. In 2005, I decided it was time to do move on and was interested in gaining the large public university experience. While interviewing at Purdue, the University was in the midst of a major diversity initiative called the Mosaic. I was impressed with the push to embrace diversity and to ensure that the campus community was one that was inclusive of all people, so I accepted the position and have been at Purdue for 13 years. My

preparation for my current role is a combination of my personal experiences and values and some of the coursework in my graduate school program. I've always worked to ensure that I create an environment where all people feel welcome, respected, valued and supported. This work is a natural fit for me as it aligns with my core values.

Q: What are the University's goals and objectives regarding diversity and inclusion programming?

A: The University is committed to creating a culture and climate that embraces, supports and makes diversity and inclusion a priority. In 2016, a committee of faculty, staff and students was created and named the Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion (ACDI). The ACDI Committee worked to create a [report](#) that outlines ten areas in which the institution will focus on to move the needle in the area of diversity and inclusion. Educational programming has become an expectation of all areas of the University.

Q: What do you feel are your biggest challenges and some of your best successes in this area?

A: The biggest challenge right now is the national climate which has created polarized "us versus them" attitudes and emboldened people to do and say things they normally would not. Helping people to subscribe to an attitude of civility and open-mindedness is imperative in creating an inclusive community. The best success has been in garnering the support of faculty, staff and student organizations. These partnerships include providing class presentations, campus-wide programs and departmental trainings designed to educate our community in the area of diversity and inclusion.

Q: This is your second year of bringing The Defamation Experience to Purdue. Why did you decide to bring the program back and how would you describe the experience?

A: The turnout for the event in 2017 was better than I expected. Students who attended told other students about it and I began getting requests to bring The Defamation Experience back to campus. It provides a safe space for the audience to grapple with hot-button and polarizing issues in a manner that is engaging and conducive to learning. With all of this in mind, we decided to bring the production back to campus again this year.

The Defamation Experience was a very high-quality program for our students and campus. The presenters were experienced, and their expertise in performance and processing alike raised the level of dialogue among our

students who actively participated in the post-performance discussion that brought out so many thoughts and ideas so worthy of examination.

It would be impossible to view and take part in this programming without thinking about your own bias, privilege, and the subtle ways in which we unknowingly act at times contrary to our own values without even consciously being aware of it. As was the case last year, the discussion went well past the end time of the event and had to be cut short. Students are still having conversation about the experience!

Q: Can you talk about the importance of partnerships? What advice do you have for other schools to help make this program successful?

A: The event is co-sponsored by Purdue's Division of Diversity and Inclusion; the Office of the Dean of Students; the College of Science Diversity Office; Purdue's cultural and resource centers; Span Plan Nontraditional Student Services; and Student Success Programs. The list of sponsors is extensive because, as one organizer put it, helping students, staff and faculty communicate across their differences is a shared responsibility.

I believe the responsibility to create a climate and culture that is conducive to all persons feeling that they belong rests on the shoulders of every community member at every level of the institution. With this in mind and adhering to the campus diversity plan outlined in the ACDI report, the committee decided to reach out to colleges and departments across campus and invite them to partner with us. Needless to say, the request was very well received, and our list of campus partners exceeded our expectations. These partnerships are vital in sending pointed messages that Purdue is committed to creating an inclusive community and is willing to do the work to bring this goal to fruition.

What I would advise other campuses to do is to align their programming with their campus goals as it relates to diversity and inclusion. Creating a committee that was comprised of members from across campus helped to make our event successful as each committee member had different connections and were able to utilize those connections to garner the support of the many departments and organizations in a variety of ways including financial, in kind (space, AV needs, food, publicity, etc.), professors who gave class credit for attending and organizations who have a diversity and inclusion requirement to meet.



Combined with an audience deliberation and a facilitated discussion THE DEFAMATION EXPERIENCE is a unique opportunity for your community to engage in civil discourse about the most pressing social issues of our day.

Watch the trailer at TheDefamationExperience.com. For more information, contact Kimm Beavers at defamationtheplay.kimm@gmail.com to start a conversation about bringing The Defamation Experience to your venue.