
CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

PEABODY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH RACE

October 24, 2014

ENVISIONING AN IDEAL PEABODY

The work of the *Crucial Conversations* initiative has, in its first year, been focused on gathering information. Generally, we have wanted to know: what is the current state of the dialogue on race and culture here at Peabody? What do we at Peabody do well? What is left unspoken? How might we improve? Towards this end, in January of 2014, the *Crucial Conversations* team hosted a campus-wide discussion event designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the struggles that students and faculty experience on campus as well as elicit suggestions for their amelioration. This event was attended by over 70 students and a dozen faculty and was well received. Throughout the rest of the spring semester, we worked to create other spaces in which people could further explore these issues. We organized and held a series of mini-discussions, conducted a brief survey, and reached out to faculty and administration members.

Altogether, we found that we have much work to do here at Peabody. Students and faculty alike noted that discussions of race and culture either (a) were completely glossed over within and outside of the classroom, or, should they happen, (b) were often conducted in a way that was unhealthy for the just recognition of diverse identities and development of socially conscious professionals. When given the opportunity, members of our Peabody community had much to say about the way race and culture is treated on our campus. Difficult as such things may have been for some to hear, it was critical that all members of our Peabody community were heard.

Yet information gathering, vitally important as it is, cannot in and of itself engender constructive change. As a step towards this greater task, we believed it necessary to construct a narrative that explains our ideal Peabody—a narrative of what it looks and feels like to be a part of an institution that actively fosters a culture of respect and recognizes peoples' dynamic identities. Using information gathered over the 2013-14 school year, members of the *Crucial Conversations* team undertook an intensive visioning process in the summer of 2014 during which we decided upon four major goals, the accomplishment of which would mark an improved Peabody.

This document presents a statement of our vision of an ideal Peabody presented through each major goal. We do not here specifically focus on other types of personal identity, including gender, sexual orientation, and class. We do, however, acknowledge and respect shared struggles, and, understanding that no single classification of identity can hope to encompass all human experience, plan to address these diverse identities as they intersect with our work on race. Through this narrative we hope to show our fellow community members the work we are doing and place it within the context of our ultimate goal: to shape Peabody into a place for open dialogue and respectful discussion about race, culture, and the identity of every person as a valued member of our scholarly community.

Goal #1: Integrate issues of diversity, power, equity, and inclusion into curricula and classroom experiences across departments and disciplines

Race still exists as a learned differentiator among people. In addition, the historical intersection between issues of race and other systems of disadvantage contributes to persistent racial and cultural inequities in modern society. A color-blind discourse on race renders it politically incorrect to acknowledge these facts, and, in turn, makes it uncomfortable to discuss race at all. In an ideology of diversity that espouses equal rights for all while simultaneously treating all difference as the result of individual choice, histories of systematic discrimination and structural inequities are overlooked and classroom dialogues about race become generally ineffective when they are not avoided altogether.

Our primary purpose at Peabody is to better understand and support education and human development in our diverse society, an inherently egalitarian goal. It is therefore not enough that critical discussions of race happen only as an extracurricular activity. They must be a central part of our shared curriculum. At our ideal Peabody, all members of the classroom, including those from non-underrepresented groups, are encouraged to proactively seek to understand persons who have lived experiences different from their own through discussions about race, oppression, power, privilege, identity, equity, and acceptance.

Because these topics are highly relevant to us as future academics, teachers, policymakers, and researchers, it is imperative that our faculty provide visible signals of their investment. Faculty at our ideal Peabody are encouraged to seek opportunities for constructive dialogue on race in the classroom. This encouragement comes from administrative requirements that flow across departments, supports to meet those requirements, and engaged students who aid in the shaping of their own curriculum. Only through active, critical discussion in the classroom will we move beyond uninformed and unsupported understandings of diversity and become the culturally competent and empathetic educators, administrators, organizers, and leaders who teach and lead the next generation.

Goal #2: Establish a sustainable system of formalized administrative support to facilitate diversity initiatives and keep all stakeholders accountable

Generating research products is important. So too is creating a safe and supportive environment for critical thinking where we learn not only from world-class faculty but also the real-world experiences of our classmates. We believe that these two models of scholarship need not be mutually exclusive but instead can join to form a single culture of excellence. All students at our ideal Peabody feel encouraged to speak confidently about their experiences with those in positions of authority, secure in the knowledge that they will be taken seriously. We envision our campus as one where our unique experiences and backgrounds are celebrated both inside and outside of the classroom. Creating a culture based on listening, sensitivity, and collaboration rather than competitiveness will lead to a more supportive environment and reduce feelings of mainstream cultural dominance within the classroom as well as provide more opportunities for critical thinking, intellectual growth, and creative problem-solving.

Calls for a change in organizational culture may originate from a select few of its members. But systemic cultural change occurs only when each of the organization's constitutive parts commit to the goal. We are committed to positive change concerning race and culture on our campus, this document and our other work serving as public statements of such. The administration, faculty, and students at our ideal Peabody similarly each have clear, public expressions of their respective commitments to making our campus a place where no one regularly experiences racism, and issues of race are critically discussed. Formalized administrative structures exist that hold members of the community accountable to their commitments while providing supports so that they may meet them.

Goal #3: Increase the racial diversity of faculty and students on Peabody's campus now and demonstrate consistent commitment to doing so in the future

Prospective students and faculty from underrepresented groups must view Peabody as a safe and welcoming space. Such a Peabody does not occur on its own, nor is it the responsibility of a few pioneers to cut a path for others. Rather, each of us must take active steps towards creating a campus environment that is open and accepting of all. At our ideal Peabody, administrators and faculty do everything they can to hire, enroll, and support a more diverse campus population. As an aid to this administrative work, each of us remains conscientious in the thousand small interactions we have with one another each day and strives to personally embody the very attitudes that we wish to see in others. This work requires a commitment of all people to make change and collectively create a Peabody that is welcoming of and celebrates all identities.

Goal #4: Create extracurricular structures to support ongoing dialogue about diversity and student experiences

Respect for a person should be neither despite nor because of his or her racial identity, as the former leads to a culture of willfully ignorant color-blindness and the latter to environments of tokenization. Instead, a person should be respected as a whole individual, with his or her racial identity acknowledged as a piece of this whole. At our ideal Peabody, this sentiment is a common one, threaded throughout the credos to which students commit and the formal and informal organizations with which they associate.

We understand that discussions of race may be uncomfortable. But discomfort is not reason enough to avoid engagement with this difficult, yet important issue. Students at our ideal Peabody understand that challenging dialogues about race form a critical part of their education and willingly acknowledge that they may feel uncomfortable at times during these conversations. Structures are in place that help students of all racial and ethnic identities learn and talk about race. For example, safe places exist in which students from all backgrounds can take the time to deconstruct comfort and privilege, both within and across their respective peer and identity groups. Through the use of structures such as these, Peabody itself becomes a safe space where all members of our community may come together to discuss race and its related issues.

Moving Forward

The July 2014 draft of Vanderbilt University's academic strategic plan states that, as a part of our broader goal of being a world-class university, we "commit to ensuring diversity of all forms in the pursuit of excellence in learning and discovery." The strategic plan further states that

[d]iversity, in the broadest sense of the term, is absolutely critical to ensuring excellence in our core missions of discovery and learning. The human condition is fundamentally shaped by the context in which we have lived, learned, and now reside...The human condition, and human lives, is shaped by these different experiences, and they give rise to very different prisms by which each individual thinks about problems and opportunities and then approaches solutions...This commitment to diversity and equality is fundamental to the University's future.

Critical discussions of the human condition, in all its various iterations, are a crucial part of our becoming the scholars and practitioners who will lead the world towards a better future. A university of excellence such as ours cultivates people of excellence, not merely through instruction in the research canon, but also through exposure to a diverse array of human experiences and each other. We as members of the Peabody community are party to this commitment to excellence via diversity.

Peabody College has many strengths. The perspectives that we have gathered from students, faculty, and administration, however, indicate that we have much work to do in order to ensure that we are meeting our goals of diversity and equality. To add to what is stated in the academic plan, we also emphasize that the responsible treatment of people's identities is a goal in and of itself, consistent with the ideals of social justice and equity. What we do now shapes the ways that inequity and power are structured later. We as a community have a responsibility not just to create diverse centers of knowledge and discovery, but also to consciously promote and live respectful, dynamic, and just lives that recognize what it means to be a person of inherent dignity. It is this mantle that the *Crucial Conversations* initiative has adopted, with the purpose of distributing this work to all stakeholders across campus: students, faculty, and administration alike.