



Campus Faces Challenges of Going Coed

Randolph College wins grant to continue dialogues



Faculty members participate in a dialogue training at Randolph College.

Men on campus. It was just one of the many changes brought about by Randolph-Macon Woman's College's transition in 2007 to a coeducational institution, Randolph College. The transformation at the 116-year-old school created concerns and questions in every corner of the campus, from the classroom to alumnae affairs to the financial office. Sides formed, divides deepened, and tension colored the once-peaceful campus in Lynchburg, Virginia.

The Acting President and some faculty members suggested addressing the conflict by creating opportunities for small group discussions. The Public Conversations Project was called upon to help create a safe environment in which members of the faculty, staff, and trustees could embark on meaningful conversations about the college.

Over the next 14 months, PCP Senior Associate Corky Becker and Program Director Dave Joseph provided six different dialogue and training sessions at the

college for community members to share their hopes, expectations, and frustrations related to such issues as the College's decision to go coed, the impact on the College's finances, and community morale. Nearly 200 people participated in the dialogues.

"The sessions were not focused on solving problems," says Joseph, "but rather on building trust. [There's] greater appreciation on campus of the fact that when trust is low, it's hard to commit to actions and to get work done."

"This was an opportunity to be heard and to be respected as an individual," says Buildings and Grounds staff



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Dave Joseph, Program Director
Public Conversations Project

member James Rucker, who was one of nineteen staff, faculty, and administrators trained to facilitate dialogue. “There were all different names and titles at the table, but everyone was equal and neutral. I was relieved that I was able to just be myself and hear others talk about themselves. It was really different than it was before. The process has given me the power to be heard and be seen. It’s unreal.”

For some, the experience had an effect on their teaching as well. “This method of getting to the root of the problem has changed the way I interact with students in my classroom and has made me a more effective teacher,” says Professor Rebecka Brasso.

After positive responses to the first three dialogue sessions, the College received a grant from the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund for three more visits by PCP staff. PCP went on to train nineteen faculty and staff and fourteen students to conduct constructive conversations on campus.

“Those who participated in the dialogue facilitator training, as well as those in the dialogues themselves, realized that they could use the process to reach out and support one another,” says Becker. “They could intentionally work to understand the experience of someone whose job or experience at the college was very different, and in doing so, they could develop a more inclusive community.”

One of the fourteen students trained in facilitation, first-year Elizabeth Zehl, calls the dialogue she participated in “unexpectedly positive and beneficial.”

“I was very surprised at the sense of intimacy in the [dialogue] group. There was a certain trust and understanding that was singular to that conversation, even while there was a lot of diversity in our viewpoints.”

Zehl is hoping that PCP’s approach will be used to start a series of dialogues on campus about topics ranging from gender equality to the upcoming election: “I see great potential for applying PCP rules in an academic setting that gives participants the tools to express their own opinions and be able to actively listen to others. PCP’s process allows people the space to be intellectually curious and to engage with others on important issues in a way that ultimately benefits their own understanding of what they believe.”

Additional dialogues are scheduled for late April and May and the planning committee for these conversations is discussing next steps. So far, participants have indicated that they want to stay connected with, and better understand, people with whom they might strongly disagree.

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Writer Maureen Robb and Randolph College granted permission to adapt this story for the Public Conversations Project newsletter.