“The Social Justice Conversation Series has become an overarching part of the professional development of leaders in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. Although we are all committed to advocating social justice, diversity and inclusion in our areas of expertise, the series provides us an opportunity to dialogue about the challenges we experience. In addition, we are able to consider and discuss our personal areas of growth around inclusion and diversity in a safe space. Not only has it brought us closer as a team, but it has also helped us identify our positionality in relation to our work and the mission of the Division.” -- Dr. Stella Smith, Campus Diversity and Strategic Initiatives, Division of Diversity and Community Engagement

On the third Wednesday morning of each month, University of Texas at Austin Division of Diversity and Community Engagement senior staff and unit directors can be found in the Student Services Building discussing issues related to social justice and diversity. “Because we are staff members in the Division of Diversity doesn’t mean we don’t need to work on how we talk about and think about social justice and diversity,” said Dr. Betty Jeanne Taylor, director of Diversity Education Initiatives within DDCE’s Campus Diversity and Strategic Initiatives portfolio. “Even though overarching issues don’t change, the manifestations of issues do change—there is always something new to talk about around these issues.”

Now in its third year, the Social Justice Conversation Series (SICS) stands out as a professional development model for other units and divisions at colleges and universities. Taylor and her colleagues first researched what was happening at other universities. “We couldn’t find a model anywhere and realized we would have to create something new. So that is what we did,” said Taylor. “Some offices provided voluntary opportunities for staff but training was not required or sustained. Our training is especially significant as we think about time and person power. Prioritizing such professional development sends a clear message. If it is already built into your day and this is how you embed into culture—it is normal.”

The SICS was developed drawing on the strategic planning process and surveys among senior staff and unit directors after two years of professional development sessions. During strategic planning focus groups it became apparent that DDCE staff members wanted to get to know each other, feel more connected to the division and learn more about other areas within the division. Staff members also articulated the desire to develop knowledge around social justice issues. Similarly, the staff surveys indicated interest in diversity training and building stronger relationships with each other.

Taylor gathered a core team of staff members to help with the development of the SICS, including former Multicultural Engagement Center Director Dr. Choquette Hamilton, Gender and Sexuality Center Director Ixchel Rosal, and Associate Vice President for Campus Diversity and Strategic Initiatives Dr. Sherri Sanders. The team began developing the series, starting with Readings for Diversity and Social Justice in the 2011-12 academic year as the foundation for conversations among small groups of staff members. Topics included ableism, sexism, religious oppression, ageism, adultism, heterosexism, transgender oppression, racism and classism.

The team selected eight staff members as cohort leaders. Taylor said, “The cohort leaders were not there to facilitate, teach or present but to provide ongoing feedback and help further design the series as it progressed.” She explained the cohort leaders are the grounding force for the series. “They help to keep conversation moving. They are all skilled in navigating conversation—if someone is dominating the conversation, for example, the cohort leader will find ways to draw out others.”

In 2012-13, the readings focused on education issues drawn from recent headlines but continued to incorporate knowledge developed from the previous year. Topics included educational equity, recruitment and retention, campus climate and legal issues. Speakers kicked off each Wednesday session with presentations around pertinent issues such as the Fisher v. University of Texas case before the Supreme Court, domestic partner benefits and campus climate. Discussion questions for each session helped the conversation flow from a social justice perspective. Sample discussion questions included, “What are some examples of how people and/or under-represented groups are invisible in oppressive systems? How might your own identities and/or privilege be informing how you view or interpret this article? How do you participate in the systems represented in the article?”
For 2013-14 the series will focus on power and privilege in education utilizing *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by bell hooks.

Taylor said it was intentional that there were no presentations around the conversation topics the first year of SJCS. “We wanted the message to be ‘This is based on you—your reflections and experience.’ We wanted the personal reflections and experience to generate dialogue; so staff could develop a level of comfort talking about the issues.” She explained, “Now we’ve normalized words like racism, heterosexism, etc. We’ve put them in the room and staff are more comfortable talking about these issues.”

Senior staff and unit directors agree, according to follow-up surveys. 95% of respondents in 2012-2013 agreed with a statement that the SJCS had increased their awareness of issues in education, and that they had analyzed issues using a social justice lens. Ixchel Rosal, director of Student Diversity Initiatives said, “The SJCS has been a means to share with colleagues from across the division our understanding of social justice; thereby, creating a joint understanding, which grounds and informs our work. This enables us to move more cohesively towards our strategic goals.”

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**Call for Proposals: Poverty Conference at Wayne State University**

The College of Education at Wayne State University has held two previous conferences that have attracted over 200 participants from six states and Canada. We expect to have even more attendees in 2014 based upon the highly favorable comments made in the 2013 post-conference survey and the line-up of speakers for 2014, which includes: Dr. Michael E. Dantley, Dean of the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago; Dr. Carolyn Shields, Dean, College of Education, Wayne State University; and Dr. Ingrid Guerra-Lopez, Associate Professor of Design and Performance Systems, College of Education, Wayne State University; and Kurt Metzger, former Director of Data Driven Detroit.

This year the conference will provide attendees with the opportunity to explore and discuss research and practices related to the challenges of, and strategies for addressing, homelessness and its impact on families and the education of children and youth. The conference brings together scholars, school administrators, teachers and other practitioners, community activists and others who are committed to improving education for children who are homeless or living in other impoverished environments.

We are seeking presenters who represent diverse backgrounds, roles, responsibilities, and experiences in serving children and families experiencing poverty and/or homelessness on the educational and achievement of children.

We invite presentations that relate to the impact of poverty and/or homelessness on education of children or that share practices or programs that are effective in schools in high-poverty areas. The sessions will be either 30 or 60 minute in length, including time for questions. Our proposal review team will attempt to honor your session length preference. Please note that all presenters must register and pay for the conference.

The proposals will be evaluated based upon the following criteria:
- Presentation clearly addresses or presents a critical issue related to homelessness and/or poverty
- Presentation goals are clearly defined
- Information provided will have practical implications for use in schools and/or communities

For more information and the online proposal submission form, please go to: http://coe.wayne.edu/poverty/proposals.php

Proposals must be submitted electronically by December 2, 2013. Presenters will be informed of the status of their proposals by December 16, 2013.

Online registration is now open for the conference. You can register at: http://coe.wayne.edu/poverty/registration.php.

Should you have questions, please send an email to: Educationconferences@wayne.edu