

Cowboys Coming Together:
Dialogue and Action around Racial Equity at Oklahoma State University
Campus Compact Fund for Positive Engagement Final Report
Executive Summary

In Fall of 2017 a diverse group of faculty, staff, and graduate students at Oklahoma State University (OSU) used a Campus Compact Fund for Positive Engagement grant to design, implement, and evaluate a dialogue to change program on the main campus in Stillwater. The program, called Cowboys Coming Together (CCT), was delivered for the first time during the Spring 2018 semester. The purpose of the program was to provide the OSU community with a process to engage in constructive dialogue and action planning in response to a series of high-profile racist incidents that had occurred on OSU's main campus in Stillwater.

Using funds obtained through the Campus Compact Fund for Positive Engagement award we developed and implemented a campus wide small-group facilitated dialogue-to-action pilot program around the issue of racism and racial equity at OSU. The program, called Cowboys Coming Together (CCT), was developed and evaluated in collaboration with a diverse group of OSU faculty, staff, and graduate students, and with the guidance of Leslie King, a consultant from the nonprofit organization Everyday Democracy. The CCT program was developed to bring the campus community together to in dialogue and action planning to achieve four short-term and two long-term goals.

In the short-term, our goals were to:

- Build relationships and increase trust among students and other members of the campus community.
- Improve the quality of life and educational experience for students, especially students from under-represented groups.
- Help CCT participants develop their civic skills and be agents of positive change.
- Engage campus stakeholders who feel they have no voice in the direction of the community.

In the long term, our goals are to:

- Establish the program as a regular and recognized part of campus culture.
- Have trained facilitators and a process available to respond quickly to other difficult issues that may arise in the future, immediately opening up a space for dialogue and allowing those affected to be heard in a respectful and safe space.

Cowboys Coming Together (CCT) uses dialogue-to-action, an approach to community change developed by the nonprofit organization Everyday Democracy that puts small-group facilitated dialogue at the center¹. Dialogue-to-action brings different kinds of people together around a public concern, and creates a space that enables constructive, respectful conversation. Participants meet over time (in this case 4 weeks), and people develop trust and relationships, as well as a shared understanding of the issue under discussion. An issue discussion guide and

¹ <https://www.everyday-democracy.org/>

facilitated dialogue help participants develop an action plan intended to address the issue, in this case racism and racial equity on campus.

The dialogues were guided by trained facilitators who managed the discussion and made room for all voices. The dialogues relied on ground rules, created by the group, to help make the conversation work for everyone. Participants used a discussion guide that set up a framework for the conversations. People began with personal stories, and then moved on to a discussion of the issue, including data and other relevant factual material. Dialogue participants examined the issue from diverse points of view, considered many possible approaches, and ultimately, developed ideas and plans for action and change, in order to improve the campus climate for all community stakeholders.

The CCT dialogue program was developed and implemented over the 2017-2018 academic year and it consisted of three phases. The first phase, community organizing, occurred between October 2017 and March 2018. The second phase, program implementation, occurred between March and April 2018. In this phase, five dialogue groups (75 people) were established. Dialogue group participants met four times in small group sessions over four weeks. Each session lasted about two hours. The third phase, action implementation, kicked off with a campus wide event in late April, where the groups presented their proposed action plans, formed four action teams, and began the process of action implementation.

CCT Program Timeline and Summary Activities

Phase 1: Campus Organizing (October 2017 to March 2018)

- The three PIs (Moore, Stout, and Lassen) developed a comprehensive campus organizing plan to begin the process of building a diverse network of volunteers to help plan, implement, and evaluate the CCT program.
- Worked with the campus community to name and frame a public issue they wanted to address using small-group facilitated dialogue (racism and racial equity).
- Recruited a CCT core team comprised of diverse community stakeholders, including university faculty, students, and staff. The core team was responsible for program strategy, logistics, and support.
- Using a participatory action research (PAR) approach, we recruited and trained a diverse research team comprised of university faculty, students, and staff. The team was comprised of four faculty, one professional staff member, two colleges, student/academic affairs, seven doctoral students and one MS student in four academic programs (Human Development and Family Science, Higher Education and Student Affairs, Research Evaluation Methods and Statistics, and Social Foundations). The involvement of the doctoral students was important because it brought racial diversity, gender diversity, and an opportunity for training the next generation of scholar-practitioners (Fretz & Longo, 2010; Jaeger, Sandmann, & Kim, 2011; Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O'Meara, 2008). The research team developed the research and evaluation plan, created the research and

evaluation materials, collected and analyzed the data, and worked on writing up the results for the final grant report.

- Developed the CCT dialogue discussion guide. The guide was developed with support from Leslie King, a consultant for Everyday Democracy. The core team then reviewed and made suggestions for the final guide. The dialogue guide is in Appendix F.
- Created a facilitator recruitment team and recruited and trained dialogue facilitators. Ten graduate students and staff members participated in the training. Eight of the trained facilitators ended up co-facilitating at least one dialogue group. More than half of the facilitators also participated in one or more of the CCT leadership teams (core, recruiting, and research).
- Recruited dialogue participants. Used email, flyers, and targeted communication with campus groups to recruit participants. A total of seventy four people participated in CCT. There were a total of dialogue five groups comprised of no more than fifteen participants.

Phase 2: Small-Group Facilitated Dialogues (March 2018 to April 2018)

- The five groups met for one two-hour session per week for four weeks.
- In week one participants were introduced to the program, started connecting with each other and building trust, and were introduced to the issue of racism and racial equity on campus.
- In week two participants began connecting their own background with their experiences in order to understand how their views on the issue have been shaped.
- In week three participants looked more deeply into the issue and began identifying underlying causes, symptoms, and possible solutions.
- In week four participants developed action plans to be implemented in CCT Phase 3.

Phase 3: Action (April 2018 to present)

- The action phase kicked off at an action forum that was held the week after the dialogue phase ended. At the action forum each group presented their action plans and began the process of action implementation.
- Participants created four action teams (one group decided to disband so that individuals could join other action teams with related interests).
- Action team one is focused on increasing awareness of existing campus programs and resources that address racism and racial equity on campus.
- Action team two is focused on building intentional multicultural leadership development opportunities into the action phase of CCT. This will include training students as facilitators for future rounds of dialogue and deliberation, as well as partnering with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and other campus partners.
- Action team three is developing new campus initiative to address racism and racial equity. These include Multi-lingual campus tours, establishing a Diversity Champions initiative, monthly dinners bringing together diverse individuals who do not ordinarily

interact, establishment of a Diversity and Inclusion curriculum for all campus constituents, and more recognition for staff who participate in the dialogue program.

- Action team four, comprised of faculty and staff, is working to review and update policies on campus related to racial equity.
- The core team is providing resources, logistical support, and other assistance to the action teams on an ongoing basis.
- The research team is developing research and evaluation materials to track progress on action implementation and to track the impact of CCT on participants and the overall campus climate.

Summary of CCT Pilot Program and Lessons Learned

Previous research and our experience with CCT at OSU have shown that dialogue programs hold promise in terms of changing individuals' understanding and attitudes about race and racial equity. Further, the dialogue to change model used for CCT focused on translating dialogue into collective action. We have anecdotal evidence suggesting that there is meaningful action happening around the issue of racism and racial equity on the part of CCT participants, and we will be following up with action teams to collect more systematic data. We will need to await the results of the longitudinal follow-ups before we can comment on CCT's impact on institutional change at OSU. However, there were many significant takeaways regarding the process and the evaluation that we used, and we will use that information to improve future iterations of the CCT program.

What we learned

The pilot round of Cowboys Coming Together taught us many lessons and gave us ideas for ways of improving the program and for sustaining the program on an annual basis. We also developed a more sophisticated understanding of the work involved with each of the three phases of the dialogue to change model (organizing, dialogues, and action), which has influenced our planning for the next round of CCT. Here are some of our key takeaways based on the results of our study and on our experience developing, implementing, and evaluating the CCT program:

Program design:

- The program should run for a full year, rather than one semester so that we have adequate time to recruit participants.
- Race matters in understanding the experiences of people in the OSU community in a way that role on campus does not. However, one of the powerful things about this dialogue program was the opportunity for students of color to meet staff and faculty who ALSO experience (and desire to change) negative campus climate.
- There was a high level of agreement that four dialogue sessions was not sufficient. We will add a session to the next round, and update the discussion guide to provide more time for the development of action ideas and action planning.

Program recruiting:

- Direct conversation with an opinion influencer was the most important element in encouraging participation.
- Whites, women, and liberals were all overrepresented. Recruiting should focus on increasing the diversity of dialogue groups.
- Most participants were already active on campus, had high levels of trust, and were involved in some type of formal civic participation, usually through a campus organization (though about half were not active in a campus organization). Recruiting should focus on connecting with parts of the community that are less active on campus and may not be aware of the issue.
- Announcements, fliers, and PR did not result in strong turn-out from students – we didn't capitalize on informal networks to bring in participants. This was the result of a failure to understand the need to integrate organizing tactics into every phase of the process. To be successful in terms of creating the kind of change that shifts campus culture and leads to different experiences by, in this case, people of color – more attention needs to be given to this aspect of the program.
- The participation of administrators was not initially considered in our planning. However, their participation turned out to be beneficial to the group dialogues. One group was comprised of only administrators and staff, and their proposals for change related directly to their specific experiences (mostly related to policy and resources on campus).

Participant outcomes and evaluations:

- Overall, participants felt the program had a positive influence on their understanding, beliefs, and attitudes about racism and racial equity on campus.
- They rated the discussion guide highly but there is room for improvement in terms of the amount of material in the guide.
- Facilitators were rated highly for being welcoming and impartial. However, there is significant room for improvement in the actual practice of facilitation as evidenced by their relatively low scores on those factors. The neutral score on facilitators connecting the dialogues to the broader community effort is particularly important.
- Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the dialogue-to-change process and the program structure. Nearly two thirds of participants felt that meeting for four sessions was not enough for them to accomplish their goals. Adding a fifth session would be beneficial.

Survey data collection:

- Need a more systematic pre-/post-program evaluation for participants. Data should be collected prior to beginning of first dialogue session and immediately following the last dialogue session.

- Surveys administered to participants online were collected over weeks and resulted in a lower response rate than if we had administered them at the beginning of the first dialogue session. The “post” surveys were administered at the action forum, which resulted in us only being able to collect information from the participants who attended the forum. The low response rate could have been avoided if the surveys had been administered at the end of the last dialogue session.
- Need to include more demographic questions and ask for participant university identification numbers in surveys. The lack of this information limited the usefulness of our attempt to examine the network characteristics of CCT participants and whether the program resulted in the formation of new network ties.
- There were also issues with the facilitator surveys. They were only administered to facilitators who attended the action forum. They didn’t ask whether facilitators had been involved with more than one group. They only asked about their perceptions of their groups. They didn’t ask about co-facilitators. They were only focused on the process, not the outcomes. A facilitator debriefing should be held following the conclusion of the dialogues and evaluations should be done at the same time.

Next Steps

With support from Campus Compact’s Fund for Positive Engagement, Cowboys Coming Together 2018 represents a pilot project, allowing the CCT team to explore the potential of structured dialogue groups followed by a focused action phase. Utilizing principles of community organizing, dialogue and deliberation, student leadership development and mixed methods research design, we conducted a rigorous evaluation and study of the first iteration of the program. Results from this study will inform the development of CCT 2.0, launching in July 2018.

As we prepare for CCT 2.0, we will be making improvements to the program by incorporating information obtained through the participant and facilitator evaluations. For example, we will be expanding the dialogue guide to include a fifth dialogue session. We will also be expanding our participant recruitment efforts in order to increase the ideological and racial/ethnic diversity of the next cohort. The data collection and evaluation strategy of the next iteration of the program will seek to increase participation in focus groups and interviews, capture additional data points of interest, and improve survey response rates.

Based on feedback from our participants, the core team decided that the next round of CCT dialogues will maintain their focus on race, with the potential to expand to a broader consideration of inclusion as befits the university’s strategic emphasis on diversity and inclusion as twin goals. Participants from Year 1 will join the facilitator team, and allow us to meet a goal of increasing participation by 25-50% over the first year. We will continue the longitudinal research, refining data collection methods to support more robust network analysis and bivariate statistical analysis. The unexpectedly strong participation by administrative staff members

suggests an opportunity to think more deeply about the role that professional staff play on university campuses, particularly with regard to organizational culture change and student success goals.