A Forced Choice Exercise to Raise Students' Awareness of Diversity

Learning communities and student organizations within chemical engineering programs have long been a means by which faculty and academic advisers interact with students outside the classroom and reinforce the values of our profession. Incorporating diversity-training activities into the training and ongoing professional development of students who teach and lead in chemical engineering departments is a simple and effective way to start to promote awareness and respect for diverse cultures and backgrounds in all chemical engineering students.

Although discussions about diversity and differences can be uncomfortable, it is important that we find ways to help our students grow in understanding their own social identities and the social identities of others around them, so that they might enhance their ability to interact cross-culturally. To address this need, we have included a Forced Choice[1] exercise (also known as Identity Strands, Identity Signs, and Identity Walk) in our training curriculum for undergraduate peer mentors who lead our first-year learning community for chemical engineering majors.

In Forced Choice, signs with various social identities written on them are posted around the room. Social identities on the signs can include, but are not limited to, the following: ability/disability status, gender, race, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Designated facilitators take turns reading statements and questions for the student participants to consider. An example statement might be, "I think about this aspect of my identity the most." Students then move about the room and stand next to the sign corresponding to the social identity that resonates most with them for the statement or question just read. Facilitators then follow up and encourage students to share their thoughts and feelings for why they chose or did not choose a particular social identity for that statement.

In our implementation of Forced Choice, we took specific steps to create a safe environment so that the students would feel comfortable participating. Since this activity was part of a two-day training module for the peer mentors, we intentionally scheduled it for the second day of training to ensure that rapport had developed within the group. Another key action we took at the start of the activity was to establish clear ground rules with the group. This included informing students that they could step out at any time if they felt uncomfortable and assuring students that discussing their choice was optional and only encouraged if they were comfortable sharing. Finally, we invited the faculty supervisor to participate in the activity with the students. These three elements—intentional timing, safe environment for sharing, and faculty buy-in—promoted active participation and open discussion during this activity.

Forced Choice can be adapted for use with student leaders, student tutors, student organizations, and graduate student teaching assistants. We find it helpful to work with a group size of about 20 students. Additionally, it is important to conduct the activity after members of the group have had a chance to establish rapport with one another.

Because many chemical engineering faculty members do not have experience facilitating an activity like this, we recommend partnering with student affairs professionals on campus, such as academic advisers, multicultural liaison officers, department of residence staff, or graduate students from higher education programs on your campus.

REFERENCE

1. Forced Choice, Retrieved from <http://www.teampedia.net/wiki/index.php?title=Forced_Choice> ❐

Monica H. Lamm, Adam H. Dane, and Janessa K. Boley, Iowa State University

This one-page column presents practical teaching tips in sufficient detail that others can adopt the tip. Focus on the teaching method, not content. The column should be maximum 600 words, but subtract 50 words for each figure or table. Submit as a Word file to Phil Wankat <wankat@ecn.purdue.edu>. Subject: CEE Teaching Tip.