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Building BRIDGES: Fostering Dialogue & Shared Understanding between Communities & Government Agencies

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Building BRIDGES

Fostering dialogue & shared understanding between communities & government agencies

Summary/Abstract

Professors Eben Weitzman and Darren Kew of the Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance are facilitating ongoing conversations among state and federal agencies and minority community representatives in Massachusetts as a means for fostering shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent to their relationship. Working with the BRIDGES program, they are applying theories around group dialogue in order to help stakeholders build lasting, productive connections.

Goals and Objectives

Apply conflict resolution and group dialogue theories to assist the BRIDGES program in strengthening connections between state and federal agencies and minority communities in Massachusetts.

Create a forum through which members of minority communities may speak directly with representatives of state and federal agencies to highlight concerns and ask questions.

Provide a platform for state and federal agencies to showcase career opportunities and through which minority community members may learn about careers in civil service.

Results/Impacts

Professors Weitzman and Kew have facilitated a large Town Hall meeting at a local mosque. A second is planned for May 2012. They are also working with a local immigrant community that has requested assistance with internal issues.

Both community representatives and state and federal agencies report that progress has been made on substantive issues.

Community representatives have reaffirmed their commitment to continuing dialogue, and to extending the opportunity to engage with government officials to larger numbers of community members.

Approaches and Methods

Fostering understanding through dialogue

Adaptation of the Open Space Technology of Harrison Owen¹. Key to this is the “Law of Two Feet”: Participants choose the topics to discuss and move freely among multiple facilitated discussions depending upon what interests them.

¹Owen, H. (2008). *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, 3rd ed.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Conclusion/Next Steps

The very nature of this effort demands that it be ongoing. Professors Weitzman and Kew continue to work with the stakeholders and are planning another dialogue for May 2012.

Building bridges through dialogue can be a slow and painful process. It is hard for participants to relinquish suspicions or shed misconceptions about each other. By speaking and listening, participants over time are prompted to self-reflection and eventually opportunities for greater understanding arise.

References and Resources

Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance:

<http://www.umb.edu/academics/mgs/crhsgg/>

Additional Partnerships, Interests, Information and/or Contacts

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