



Cindee Gray, left, and Sharon Edwards discovered they had much in common when they were paired in RIT's first Partnerships in Pluralism program in 2004.

Getting together

Interracialpartnersprogrambuildsbridges,forgesfriendships

On one hand, RIT's Partnerships in Pluralism program is as simple as its name suggests, implying a coming together of people who are different from one another.

On the other hand, its name belies the potentially deep impact of the program on individual attitudes and behaviors, as well as on the professional, social and other networks to which individuals belong.

"The program provided me with an abundance of opportunities to learn not only about others but also about my personal biases in interacting with select groups inside and outside of RIT," says Sharon Edwards, operations manager at RIT's high-technology incubator, Venture Creations. She and Cindee Gray, assistant vice

president for Government and Community Relations, were partners during the program's kickoff year in 2004.

"One thing that has stuck with me is my perception of Cindee before I ever met her," says Edwards. "I went in thinking it would be just another relationship, due to my own baggage from previous interactions in my life. Our first meeting was at Java Wally's, and neither of us knew what the other person looked like. After determining who I was, she approached me and gave me the biggest bear hug when I had planned to only extend a hand. We discovered we had so much in common, and we were both career-oriented. The rest is history."

“Sometimes diversity and racial issues can be overwhelming and misunderstood. This program encourages people to engage in dialogue, build relationships, and share as a way of accepting and celebrating their cultures.”

Freddie Cox
Partnerships in Pluralism program coach

For her part, Gray says she has long believed that people always have more similarities than differences. “I thought the program was a great opportunity to get to know someone at RIT that I might not typically meet,” she says.

“We developed a good relationship and still enjoy seeing each other and catching up with each other’s lives. There is a great value in diversity, and building that institutional network is key to furthering our creativity and innovation.”



Alfreda Brown

Partnerships in Pluralism is a yearlong program that matches African

American, Latino American and Native American (AALANA) members of RIT’s faculty, staff and administrative communities with non-AALANA members. Now in its fifth year, the program boasts 214 graduates and 42 coaches.

On the surface, it may not seem like it has the potential to literally change lives, let alone entire organizations, but some alumni of the program, whose beliefs and relationships with others have changed as a result of their involvement, just might disagree.

Alfreda Brown, RIT’s interim chief diversity officer and the Partnerships program co-chair, says a key goal is to “break down cultural misperceptions and stereotypes and to help build trust and credibility. There are more similarities among cultures than there are differences, and it only takes opening the lines of communication to realize that people can have lasting relationships with others who are different than themselves.”

After members of the RIT community apply to participate in the program, Brown and co-chair Keith Jenkins, associate professor in the Department of Communication, select the two people who make up each pair with help from Sandra Whitmore, assistant to the chief diversity officer. The pairs meet at a kick-off session for all

participants in the fall. After that, each pair meets on its own twice a month, as well as at least once each quarter with other sets of partners and coaches who facilitate discussions. Written questions for discussion are provided, but it is not a requirement that they be strictly followed.

RIT’s program is an offshoot of the City of Rochester’s Bi-Racial Partnerships program, which was designed and implemented in 2000 by an advisory committee appointed by former mayor William Johnson, now RIT Distinguished Professor of Public Policy.

Johnson says the committee’s charge was “to find a community-wide initiative to alleviate racial disparities,” particularly among leaders. He says a similar program was started at the agency he previously headed, the Urban League of Rochester.



William Johnson

“I found over the years there was very little inter-group interaction between leaders of disparate communities,” he says. “The business community rarely interacted with the religious leadership; suburban and city leaders rarely inter-

acted except in crisis situations; and there was shockingly very little interaction across racial and ethnic lines.”

One of the participants in the city’s program was RIT President Emeritus Albert Simone, who teamed with Gladys Santiago, formerly of the Ibero-American Action League and currently Rochester City Council president.

“I thought it would be a terrific program to model at RIT,” says Simone, “bringing together minority and majority faculty, staff, and students to learn about each others’ cultures and experiences and, because of the networking, enable RIT to function more effectively.”

Although concerned early on that the program might be viewed as a distraction, Simone says he was thrilled to see the interest and investment by those who participated. Among the most important objectives in

his mind, he says, was enhancing “cultural sensitivity” on the part of individuals, in turn increasing “organizational effectiveness” at RIT.

In 2006, the Office of the Chief Diversity Officer and the RIT Leadership Institute jointly began running a program for students called the Global Leadership Program. Similar to the Partnerships program, this initiative involves matching students from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in pairs and designating faculty or staff mentors to work with the students.

Sean Conklin, a second-year student from Allegany, N.Y., with majors in both new media publishing and cultural resource studies, participated during 2007-08. He partnered with fourth-year biotechnology student Khairunnisa Ghazali, who is from Malaysia.

Conklin describes the program as his “first real introduction to the topic of globalization and its importance in almost all job sectors today.”

“The program teaches you that people are different, and it is OK to recognize, embrace and celebrate these differences, which I think people often times try not to do in our overly politically correct world,” Conklin says. “I now recognize these differences and try to be more culturally competent in my day-to-day life.”

Conklin says another benefit of participation has been the opportunity to discuss the program in his co-op interviews. In one case, he says the interviewer was so interested that they talked about his Global Leadership experiences for 45 minutes.

Simone says he believes the importance of partner programs such as these far transcends RIT. “If this country is to survive as a world leader,” he says, “it must reflect genuine mutual respect for all human differences, and it must be able to build from the unique contributions of every human being. For this to occur, each institution must possess these attributes. Partnerships in Pluralism is strongly moving RIT in this direction.”

Sharon Edwards, who is now a coach



Sean Conklin, left, and Khairunnisa Ghazali took part in RIT's Global Leadership Program, a student version of Partnerships in Pluralism.

in the program, concurs with Simone's global assessment. "The economic environment is changing rapidly and in order to maintain a competitive advantage as a university, diversity must take precedence in the hearts of everyone at RIT," she says. "Exclusion will no longer be acceptable in the workforce.

"Some people are still very uncomfortable discussing race issues, discrimination, and inequality," she adds. "I have learned tremendously about myself and the work involved if you truly and wholeheartedly want to overcome discriminatory behavior. It is only through communication and commitment that one can overcome, and I believe the Partnerships in Pluralism program provides the safe environment for such dialogue to take place."



Dave Edborg

he or she has made a connection with someone new in our university, that is a win," Edborg says. "As coaches, we see and live that with every group we interact with. Some tough discussions have occurred within our groups, and all have graciously responded and participated."

Cox adds, "Sometimes diversity and

Dave Edborg, major, Patrol Operations, and Freddie Cox, manager of RIT/NTID financial relations, were partners during the program's first year and have teamed together as coaches ever since.

"If one can say



Freddie Cox

become more effective serving faculty, staff, and particularly students."

Peter Rosenthal

Rosenthal, a Partnerships alumnus, oversees recruitment and marketing at the E. Philip Saunders College of Business, where he is also an adjunct professor of marketing.