

# The Case for Cultural Competency

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Like all schools, Blake has its own unique culture, one that is defined by myriad traditions, a continual quest for academic excellence and, of course, by the individuals who represent a variety of cultural traditions, beliefs and practices. While rooted in region, time and founding principles, Blake's culture is also slowly evolving as the community actively examines itself, its practices, its beliefs and its behaviors. But as we look to the future and consider the multi-cultured world into which our graduates will enter, it becomes apparent that Blake's culture needs to evolve faster in order to prepare our students for their role as members of a global community. Cultural competency, defined by Gary Howard as "the will and the ability to create authentic and effective relationships across differences," will be a skill set young people must acquire in order to survive and thrive.

While the concept of culture is often presumed to be race, ethnicity or national heritage, it is better defined as a normative system that guides people's behavior within a given context. Culture can refer to a small group as well as a larger society; it can be defined for majority as well as minority populations. Culture is a bigger picture, a "totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought." (American Heritage Dictionary, 1978).

## Shifting Demographics

It is apparent that the demographics of this country are shifting rapidly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, those who self-identify as white comprised 81 percent of the population in 2000 with 12.7 percent self-identifying as black, 12.6 percent Hispanic, 3.8 percent Asian and 2.5 percent multi-racial or other. By 2030, population

projections show those self-identifying as white decreasing to 75.8 percent with all other racial groups growing (20.1 percent Hispanic, 13.9 percent black, 6.2 percent Asian and 4.1 percent all other).

Minnesota's population will reflect this national trend, according to the Minnesota State Demographic Center. "In 2000, 9 percent of Minnesotans identified themselves as



Lis Viehweg (left) and Kelley Nelson at Commencement 2006

non-white. This is projected to rise to 13 percent by 2015 and 16 percent by 2030." Today Minnesota hosts some of the United States' largest Hmong and Somali communities. Given this data, the complexion of the majority culture at Blake is likely to further diversify. Students will graduate, attend colleges and enter a workforce that will also reflect these changing demographics. This changing makeup of our world demands everyone develop the skills necessary to work across cultures.

## A Lifelong Process

Cultural competency is a lifelong process and skill that allows us to recognize our own personal values, beliefs, biases, histories and personalities and learn how to work and communicate with those outside of our culture successfully in spite of the differences. At Blake, we are examining and working to actualize true cultural competency of our students, teachers and other members of the community. We have a number of events, student and adult leaders, systems, programs and curriculum established to provide a foundation for this work; however, there is much more work to be done.

Developing cultural competency is imperative to our students' eventual success in this increasingly multicultural, diverse, global society. The very act of pursuing cultural competency helps students develop concomitant abilities to think independently, respect others, and speak clearly and eloquently about human rights and dignity. The best schools recognize this educational dictum and pursue it with specific intention by holding all community members accountable to stated expectations and common goals.

In 2003, Blake administered a young alumni survey. Only 19.7 percent of those surveyed identified "diverse environment" as an achieved aspect of the School's

## Examining Race at Blake

This summer many Blake faculty and administrators participated in a two-day workshop on race, its impact on education and its role at the School. "Beyond Diversity: A foundation for deinstitutionalizing racism and eliminating the racial achievement gap" provided workshop attendees with tools of language and precepts (as well as time for practice) to help facilitate effective conversations about race, both in and outside of Blake. *(continued on page 33)*

mission. Additionally, 36 percent of young alum respondents disagreed with the statement “Through my experience at Blake, I feel I was well prepared to live and work with people from diverse backgrounds.” In 2005, the Independent School Association of the Central States (ISACS) administered a constituent survey as part of the School’s reaccreditation process. Among the questions, respondents were asked to circle which parts of the Blake mission they felt the School achieved. While 100 percent of respondents agreed that Blake provides students with an excellent, academically challenging education, only 46 percent identified “diverse environment” as achieved. These disconnects of mission, coupled with the changing demographics in this country, compel us to undertake the work of cultural competency.

**Shifting Generations**

For many families, attendance at Blake is a tradition and legacy. The admissions process for multi-generation independent school attendees is as familiar as the classrooms and hallways of the school itself. For many others,

however, independent school in and of itself is a novel concept.

For example, Jane was at the top of her class in a large Minneapolis public middle school. She heard good things about Blake from a neighborhood friend, and she asked her mother to call for more information. The family quickly received a large packet of information from Blake including a colorful viewbook, extensive application forms (with a \$100 fee request), required testing dates, information sessions, interview procedures, visit days and financial forms. A product of public schools herself, Jane’s mother did not know where to start with all of this material. Further, she did not want to show her ignorance by calling on the Admissions Office for assistance, so she worked through the process as best she could, relying on friends’ and colleagues’ advice. While her mother was able to take a sick day for the visit, Jane had to find her own way to Blake for the required testing.

After being accepted, Jane discovered that the expectations at Blake were quite different from those in the public schools. For example, teachers expected students to not

***Cornerstone, A Student of Color Alliance***

Cornerstone, A Student of Color Alliance (formerly Blake 101) was created in 2004 to help Upper School students of color identify and negotiate the School’s academic and socio-cultural norms, balance the daily opportunities they face in school and life, and provide support for each other. Through Cornerstone, students build both their academic and leadership skills. Additionally, a component of the alliance supports parents and guardians of students of color as they navigate the terrain of their children’s experiences at the Upper School, providing opportunities for them to learn about Blake’s culture and norms, avenues for involvement, and the best strategies to support their children at various stages in their high school years. The alliance also strives to build community among these parents and guardians so they can share common experiences and support each other.

Cornerstone was developed to support the particular experience of students of color who have different needs than majority culture students and for whom Blake’s traditional support systems aren’t enough. There is no one definition of what a student of color is or looks like because of the significant range in racial makeup, class background and educational experience. However, the common bond is that, because of race, students of color often have a different experience at Blake than white



Cornerstone participants, front row, L to R: Kristyn Bridges '08 and Angelina Momanyi '08. Middle row, L to R: Zoe Sponsler-Hoehn '09, Louisa Harstad '08, Tenisha Williams '08, Sean-Michael Groomes '09, Alisha Reynolds '07 and Julian Felder '07. Back row, L to R: Marie Michael, Cornerstone director and faculty member, Jeremiah Ellison '08 and Dante Van Court '09.

students. Although we would like to believe that Blake is a safe school for all of our students — a school where they feel at home, accepted and appreciated for who they are and where they can find the support they need to be well-rounded, successful students — Blake can sometimes be a difficult place for students of color to

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*“[Cornerstone] provides a fun environment to study and do homework. In a school like Blake, it is nice to be able to spend time with other students of color while being motivated by a teacher of color.” — Cornerstone student*

*“... Blake graduates must learn to effectively work in unfamiliar cultures to be successful world citizens ...”*

only ask questions in class but to seek additional help after class if necessary. Jane also found that participation in sports was expected. She had never played on a sports team before and not only had to learn how to play but also had to purchase the equipment, a cost she and

her mother had not anticipated. Jane discovered what might be invisible to those who have grown up in independent schools: there is a unique culture, defined by race, class and more, that became transparent once Jane became a member of the community.

Thus the door is opened to active learning of cultural competency. Students and families who have not traditionally attended independent schools come in contact with a normative system with which they are unfamiliar. To be successful within that context, traditionally underrepresented families must navigate the Blake culture. Simultaneously they ideally transform the cultural norms to be more reflective of our diverse community (see “Cornerstone, A Student of Color Alliance”). Similarly, Blake graduates must learn to effectively work in unfamiliar cultures to be successful world citizens, as Blake’s mission dictates.

**Cultural Competency In Action**

This May, the Twin Cities community was invited to hear Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, journalist, theologian and self-proclaimed hip-hop intellectual, speak at Blake’s 15th annual Diversity Symposium (see page 25).

While the Blake community itself is not yet the racially and economically diverse school it aspires to be, Dyson’s audience was representative of the pluralism in the Twin Cities. The feeling in the air could only be described as electric, and anyone in attendance could tell you that time spent in the Juliet Nelson Auditorium never felt, or sounded, like this before.

Dyson hugged every person with whom he came in contact on his way to the stage, where he held the audience riveted for more than an hour with his thoughts on Hurricane Katrina, the intellect of Tupac Shakur, the hypocrisy of Bill Cosby, the keys to effective education (“kids know when you care about them”), and the “passive indifference” to the plight of the poor in this country. He would occasionally burst into song (James Brown) or rap (Nas and Tupac). Dyson was riveting, partially because he was in touch with his audience; he knew how to reach them as a culturally competent master communicator.

Dyson exhibited cultural competency when he recognized that a large portion of his audience was black and then spoke in a style that resonated with them. Each of us engages in a form of cultural competency daily when we choose to speak differently to our peers than we may to our supervisors or when we choose to wear a suit to an interview instead of our jeans. Cultural competency takes the ideology of diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism and holds each of us, regardless of skin color, accountable for realizing the goals of inclusivity that have been elusive for so long. Dyson demonstrated cultural competency when he looked at the audience and ascertained how best to create an effective, authentic relationship beyond traditional stereotypes. He saw the audience for what it was: a diverse, curious, supportive group of individuals willing and eager to be engaged.

**Blake of the Future: The Next Step & Beyond**

The Board of Trustees recently approved our next strategic plan, entitled “Blake 2010: Investing in Excellence, Committing to Community, Ensuring Effectiveness.” One of the six key areas of focus laid out in this five-year plan is “setting clear and specific goals to improve our cultural competency throughout the entire community” (see “Blake 2010” below).

A first step to achieving and improving community-wide cultural competency will be to determine how well we are currently working as a collective group across

**Blake 2010 — Goal #4**

**REALIZE OUR ASPIRATIONS FOR A PLURALISTIC COMMUNITY.**

In order to achieve excellence as defined by our mission and to be recognized as one of the top independent schools in the nation, The Blake School must be both a diverse and culturally competent community. We are defining cultural competency in the words of Gary Howard as “the will and ability to form authentic and effective relationships across our differences.” By 2010, it is our hope that Blake will be, and will be widely recognized as, a culturally competent institution where all constituents are engaged in self-reflective, ongoing work to make Blake a more diverse, pluralistic and responsive community.

*To read “Blake 2010” in its entirety, visit Blake’s web site at [www.blakeschool.org/atTheBlakeSchool/2010strategicPlan.html](http://www.blakeschool.org/atTheBlakeSchool/2010strategicPlan.html).*



Jeff Alden-Pope (far left), Blake's director of diversity training, teaches the art of African drumming during Celebration of Community 2005. The biennial event celebrates the many facets of diversity in the Blake community including cultural backgrounds, ethnic traditions and rituals, entertainment, food, dress, education, language and the arts.

differences. In the fall of 2005, our Diversity Leadership Council tested an assessment tool called the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI). The IDI measures not how much we know about other cultures, but how we might interact with them given our life experiences. After receiving the IDI profile and some targeted training relevant to our collective experiences, the council has become more effective in its meetings and work. The success of the tool with the Diversity Leadership Council suggests that the IDI be administered community-wide as an excellent starting point for achieving greater cultural competency. From there, conversations using common language and tools of understanding can better help us grow in all areas of cultural competency — race, gender, religion, language, traditions and many more.

This past spring, the Upper School Student Diversity Leadership Council watched the reality show “Black. White.” The program featured a white family and a black family swapping races through the magic of makeup. The family members all lived together and interacted in the world as members of their new race. The cross-cultural conversations Blake’s students (and adults) had after viewing this program were remarkable examples of what we should all undertake — talking to each other, asking questions, being curious and not making assumptions.

During the question-and-answer period that followed Dyson’s address, he was asked, “Why do I cringe when I hear the [phrase] ‘different from us’? We are all so much the same. It feels divisive and separating.” He replied, “Assimilation says you have to become me to be accepted. I don’t want to change who I am. Noticing that I am black is not the problem. What I want is for you to get over your response to my blackness. We should just love each other. *Difference without hierarchy is key.*” [editor’s emphasis]

We ask all Blake community members to give themselves permission to notice difference and talk about it. Talk about race, gender, religion. Explore and be curious about each other’s experiences and learn not to negate or marginalize out of fear or ignorance. Be willing to have courageous conversations and be eager to learn more about your own “otherness.” Reach out. Engage. Ask questions. Honor.

*(Cornerstone: continued from page 11)*

thrive. Additionally, some students of color who transfer to Blake in middle or upper school have a different educational background than Blake “lifers” and need help adjusting to the change in academic expectations.

Another facet of the services Cornerstone offers is fostering cultural competency among students and adults. For many students of color their home culture is different than Blake’s school culture. The alliance helps families of color and professionals at Blake navigate the colliding of cultures, which has and will continue to occur as Blake becomes a more diverse school. When many students of color walk through Blake’s doors they have to “code-switch,” changing the way they speak, act and even dress in order to fit within the School community. As they return home, they switch back to language, actions and dress that are the norm in their home communities. Being able to code-switch is a form of cultural competency that allows them to gain respect and acceptance and to be more effective within their various communities.

Likewise, as Blake becomes a more inclusive community, it learns to see what has in the past been invisible: its own culture. The School becomes more effective at identifying ways in which it needs to change in order to serve the emerging, more inclusive community it is becoming. Students of color and their families both adapt to and change the school of which they have become a part. Through the process, all involved become better able to identify cultural norms and move in and out of them, communicating and connecting more effectively.

*“Our family would have experienced fewer tears had there been a [Cornerstone] when our older daughter attended Blake ... this is a step in the right direction”*

— Cornerstone parent

## ***Examining Race at Blake***

*(continued from page 10)*

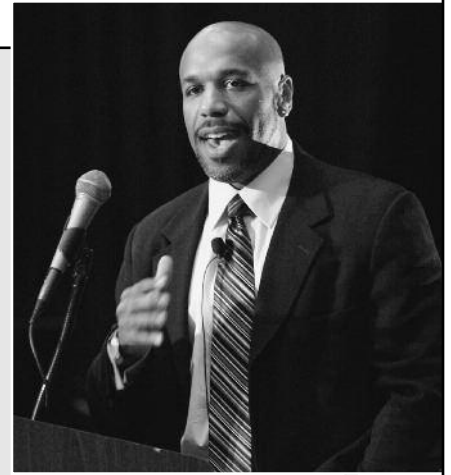
Glenn Singleton of the Pacific Education Group led this provocative and challenging program. Singleton is an educator-turned-consultant who works with public and independent schools across the country to grow educational equity.

Singleton cites the importance of using “courageous conversation” as means to “engage, sustain and deepen interracial dialogue about race, racial identity and institutional racism for the purposes of examining schooling and improving student achievement.” Fear, denial, exhaustion and a host of other issues often prevent school communities from exploring their collective and individual beliefs and behaviors in the area of race. This in turn impacts students, teachers and families as everyone silently works to navigate educational waters that are rife with political rightness and majority rules. In Blake’s case, “whiteism” — the systems and presumptions of a predominantly white community — plays a major role in the School’s culture. Singleton led an in-depth, non-judgmental discussion exploring whiteism, what it means to the community and its impact on all Blake’s students and families, both those who are white as well as those of color.

Bringing a wealth of personal and professional experience, Singleton shared his willingness and courage to explore with the Blake community the topic of race.

While much of the workshop focused on learning more about racism, time was allotted at the end of the two days for developing personal action plans. Singleton challenged attendees to lay out what each can do to help Blake’s students of color have the best educational experience possible. The intense workshop experience provided a much-needed racial framework for the future work in Blake’s classrooms and beyond.

*If you have questions or want to join us in our exploration of cultural competency, contact us at [blakebulletin@blakeschool.org](mailto:blakebulletin@blakeschool.org).*



**Glenn Singleton of the Pacific Education Group led Blake faculty and administrators in a provocative and challenging workshop on race this summer.**