

Center for Public Service study to compare Tulane, UNO student populations

November 28, 2017 2:00 PM Roger Dunaway

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Nicole Caridad Ralston, program manager for the Center for Public Service's community service programs, will facilitate a study of student populations at the University of New Orleans and Tulane University to foster cross-cultural empathy and civic and community engagement. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

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This spring, Tulane's Center for Public Service (CPS) will roll out a new study called "Conversations Across Difference: An Intercultural Competency and Community Engagement Series." The study will engage student populations at the University of New Orleans, a public institution, and the private Tulane University, to foster cross-cultural empathy and civic and community engagement.

The project is funded by a grant received from Campus Compact, a Boston-based nonprofit organization working to advance the public purposes of higher education, and is slated for completion by August 2018.

According to the grant proposal, today's college students, Generation Z, are characterized by their use of technology and, in some cases, lowered empathy and critical thinking skills. The proposal noted that it is important to facilitate learning to foster cross-cultural empathy and civic/community engagement, but it is particularly important for Generation Z. Since Gen Z also engages in online communication more than other generations, this study will engage in both online and face-to-face engagement settings.

Nicole Caridad Ralston, program manager for CPS' community service programs, will facilitate the study and will work in collaboration with UNO's LeeAnne Sipe, director of student involvement and leadership. Ralston previously worked at UNO for three years before moving across town to Tulane, where she has spent the past two and a half years. Her knowledge of both student groups was one of the driving forces behind the grant proposal.

According to Ralston, CPS was interested in adopting the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) model several years ago. The model is rooted in improving cross-cultural understanding and competence in individuals and organizations. The CPS began using the IDI as an internal strategic plan around inclusive excellence and wanted to have staff members trained to work with many of Tulane's student organizations.

"When this grant came about, we thought it would be a good idea to apply and do a pilot group," Ralston said. "We will build out everything proposed in the grant, recruit students and run the program in the spring. The student groups will participate in weekly workshops and engage in online blog posts together."

The goal will be to determine if the IDI model can be used to move people along the spectrum of mono-cultural thinking to inter- and cross-cultural modes of communication. The study will compare the potential differences between the two student populations.

"I hope the students gain the tools to have conversations about differences. I want them to leave the program with a toolkit of how to have conversations and how to bring others in who have different opinions. And, ideally, have some real growth from when they take the pre-assessment to when they take the post-assessment," Ralston said.

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- Nicole Caridad Ralston