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Charles Ryan Brown  
*Portland State University*

Grace L. Dillon  
*Portland State University, dillong@pdx.edu*

Celine Fitzmaurice  
*Portland State University, celine@pdx.edu*

Greg Jacob  
*Portland State University*

Yves P. Labissiere  
*Portland State University*

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**Authors**

Charles Ryan Brown, Grace L. Dillon, Celine Fitzmaurice, Greg Jacob, Yves P. Labissiere, Antonia Levi, Cherry Muhanji, Candyce Reynolds, and Jack C. Straton

# “VARYING REALITIES OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE”: UNIVERSITY STUDIES PROGRAM AT PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

*Charles Ryan Brown, Grace L. Dillon, Celine Fitzmaurice, Greg Jacob, Yves Labissiere, Antonia Levi, Cherry Muhanji, Candyce Reynolds, and Jack Straton*

Like many institutions of higher education, Portland State University (PSU) has engaged in initiatives to promote a more equitable and democratic society, from curricular changes to institutional policy implementation. In the late 1980s, PSU required students to complete a certain number of “diversity” credits as part of its general education requirements. During the 1990s, PSU radically revised its approach to general education, creating the University Studies Program that places diversity awareness among its core goals. Most recently, current President Daniel O. Bernstine has instituted a comprehensive “Diversity Initiative” as part of a series of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of university life for students, faculty, and staff.

This paper recounts the institutional context for the University Studies Program’s emphasis on diversity, provides an overview of the University Studies general education curriculum, which is designed as a series of interdisciplinary learning communities, and offers examples of teaching approaches that promote diversity awareness.

## **Institutional Context: PSU’s Diversity Initiative**

Institutional planning and resource allocation at PSU are guided by a series of Presidential Initiatives aimed at measuring and enhancing the quality of student, faculty, and staff experiences as members of our campus community. These initiatives emerged from the work of the Commission on Campus Climate and Life, a team appointed by President Bernstine in January 1998. The Commission focused primarily on the student experience and considered a broad range of questions, including obvious concerns such as whether library and technology resources adequately support learning, as well as larger issues related to students’ social well-being. Based on the results of the Commission’s 1999 Report, President Bernstine appointed Action

Councils for three initiatives: Diversity, Student Advising, and Assessment. (A fourth initiative, Internationalization, was added later.) These Action Councils were charged with more fully articulating goals and recommendations related to the initiatives.

PSU defines its identity as an urban university committed to partnering with constituents in the local community in order to create a better place to live and work. As the only urban university in the state, it serves the population of the Portland, Oregon-Vancouver, Washington, metropolitan area consisting of six counties of mixed urban and rural character. Ethnically this region is not very diverse. Census figures from 2000 show that 84.5 percent of the population is white. Since PSU is located in the heart of the downtown district of the largest and most diverse city in the region, it is no wonder that the process of institutional self-reflection identified diversity as a critical component of our commitment to serve the city. As the President's website points out, "PSU recognizes that diversity in faculty, staff, and student populations enriches the educational experience, promotes personal growth, strengthens communities and the workplace, and enhances an individual's personal and professional opportunities. As a public university, we have a special responsibility to work for equity and social justice and to make our programs truly accessible to our diverse constituents."<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, the Diversity Action Council (DAC) set about creating an Action Plan for increasing diversity of students, faculty, and staff. The DAC regularly advises the president and provost on relevant issues, works collaboratively with departments and programs throughout the university to ensure that curriculum includes diversity awareness, facilitates scholarship and research on diversity, and lobbies for resources in support of the Initiative. Goals in the Action Plan include increasing the number of students, faculty, classified staff, and administration from underrepresented groups and strengthening ties with regional communities that represent diverse populations. In keeping with the spirit of respecting multiple approaches and opinions, DAC's Action Plan paints its recommendations broadly while inviting individual units to determine the best means of implementing them. DAC regularly offers assistance to individuals, programs, and departments that seek help in making diversity a priority. Among its many activities, DAC oversees the production of a quarterly campus newsletter on diversity issues and works with the Center for Academic Excellence to award faculty and student mini-grants (up to \$1,000) in support of proposals to fund curricular development and scholarship.

Projects funded by these grants have assessed the effectiveness of one faculty member's interracial dialogue workshop, helped another create a series of one- to three-minute computer video clips that European American faculty can use to bring the voices of people of color into their classrooms, and supported a website for students around the world to share stories of how they have intervened across racial lines.<sup>2</sup>

DAC also facilitates a "Focus on Diversity Series" showcasing faculty research related to diversity. The series theme in winter 2004 served to mark the 150th anniversary of Japanese-U.S. relations and included topics such as "The Myth of Japanese American Sabotage at Pearl Harbor & the Internment of U.S. Citizens" and "Challenges for Japan: A U.S. Perspective." DAC continues to monitor the university's progress and reports that in the last four years PSU's percentage of diverse faculty has risen from 6 percent to 13 percent; our percentage of undergraduate students from underrepresented groups has increased by 45.1 percent, which is 3.7 percent greater than the overall growth of the undergraduate population; and our percentage of graduate students from underrepresented groups has increased by 46.1 percent, which is 31.9 percent greater than overall graduate enrollment growth.

### **Diversity and the Emergence of University Studies**

Faculty and administrators were encouraging institutional growth in diversity awareness well before the 1999 Report of the Commission on Campus Climate and Life suggested a Diversity Initiative. In 1993, a working group of faculty at PSU began examining its general education requirements and took on the question posed by then Provost Michael Reardon, "Can you state with conviction that these requirements are meaningful?" PSU's general education program at that time required students to take two diversity courses from an approved list of options distributed among different departments. By fall of 1992, 102 courses had been approved as satisfying the diversity requirement. The group working on general education reform appreciated that departments had an incentive to list as many courses as possible in order to maximize student credit hours, but also warned that the coherence and focus intended by the diversity requirement diminished as a consequence. Looking at the entire general education model, the group cited the need for improved academic preparation and for relevance and coherence throughout the curriculum. After much study of issues on campus and of general education nationwide, they

proposed a new “University Studies” general education program that was approved by the Faculty Senate in late 1993.

The purpose of University Studies is to facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that will form a foundation for lifelong learning among its students. Its four core learning goals are (1) inquiry and critical thinking, (2) communication, (3) awareness of the diversity of human experience, and (4) ethics and social responsibility. University Studies offers courses at all undergraduate levels and is a required program for incoming freshmen and for most transfer students. The yearlong foundation course, Freshman Inquiry, designed by interdisciplinary faculty teams, introduces students to all four program goals through thematic content. Following the Freshman Inquiry course, students elect three Sophomore Inquiry courses, each of which introduces them to a thematic cluster of upper-division courses. Students then elect to specialize in one area by taking three upper-division cluster courses in one theme. The final course is a Senior Capstone, in which interdisciplinary groups of students work with a faculty facilitator and a community partner to address needs and issues in the metropolitan region or beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Diversity awareness is integrated into the curriculum from Freshman Inquiry through Senior Capstone, and implementing diversity awareness as a goal to be threaded throughout all levels of the program challenges University Studies faculty to define diversity broadly. The latest iteration from the Freshman Inquiry Faculty Handbook (2003–04) is reproduced here:

*The Freshman Inquiry student will understand and appreciate the varying realities of the human experience. This involves examining wider ethnic and cultural perspectives within the United States and around the world. Some of the issues connected may be those of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. It also involves appreciating diverse beliefs, experiences, and forms of creativity entailed in the scientific, social, cultural, environmental, and artistic components of human experience; and an appreciation of how human diversity is fundamental to the full realization of human potential on an individual, community, and global level.*

Rather than taking stand-alone courses on diversity issues that might lead students to isolate the concept of diversity as an intellectual construct separate from daily experience, PSU students encounter diversity issues throughout a four-year program of study that invites

them to confront issues both theoretically and intimately, as they engage in real-world, community-based projects. The intention of this integration is to add relevance and coherence for students, elements that the working group found lacking in previous general education requirements as well as in their investigation of general education programs nationwide.

### **Laying the Foundation: Diversity in Freshman Inquiry**

Freshman Inquiry courses are team-taught, multidisciplinary, yearlong courses. The themes have included: *Chaos and Community*; *The Columbia Basin*; *The Constructed Self*; *Einstein's Universe*; *Entering the Cyborg Millennium*; *Sex, Mind and the Mask*; *Forbidden Knowledge: The Sacred and the Profane*; *Meaning and Madness at the Margins*; *Metamorphosis*; *Pathways to Sustainability and Justice*; and *The Power of Place*. Three of these are also offered for seniors in four area high schools, with similar but extended curricula (see Traver, et al. 2003). The study of diversity enters into the storyline of each of these multidisciplinary courses in somewhat different ways, but it typically focuses on race and ethnicity and examines issues through the lenses of history, multicultural appreciation, and interpersonal and institutional oppression theory.

An extended example may help to demonstrate how issues of diversity arise naturally from the content of many of these Inquiry themes. *Columbia Basin Inquiry* focuses on the geographical region defined by the Columbia River, which is the second largest river by volume in the United States. Its watershed includes most of the surface area of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, as well as portions of Nevada, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, and British Columbia. Portland, Oregon, is the largest city in the Columbia River Basin. Issues involving the Basin's economics, environment, and culture provide fodder for ongoing debates in the press and community. Through this course, students acquire an overview of the natural and human history of the Basin, examine the ethical, political, and social issues surrounding human/environmental interaction in the region, and make informed judgments about our stewardship of the region.

A number of opportunities exist for students enrolled in the *Columbia Basin Inquiry* to explore diversity issues, especially differences in ethnic and cultural perspectives, and differences in class and gender. An obvious topic is the natural economy of Native American tribes in the Columbia Basin. Most of our students are familiar with

the industrial economy of the United States and its emphasis on fossil fuels, centralized production, and cash value. Students are less familiar with the Native American values for land and water. To Native Americans the landscape is organized into watersheds rather than cities and states, and the watersheds are interconnected rather than broken down into discrete economic spheres in the industrial economy (Fixico 2003). Salmon, for example, are not valued only after they are caught and processed. They are part of the natural cycle, and they provide necessary nutrients to the soil, insects, and wildlife after they have completed their life cycle. Students question and write about these two different economies, and they consider them from a perspective of land stewardship.

Students also have the opportunity to study the lives of people of color who have struggled to make a living in the Pacific Northwest. Students learn about Oregon public policy that segregated against African Americans; the unwritten but enforced policy that did not allow Chinese to fish commercially on the Columbia River, but instead gave them long working hours in the canneries as butchers; the dehumanizing treatment of Japanese citizens who were forced to relocation centers during WWII; and the economic and social struggles of the working class in Portland, Oregon, during the 1930s and 40s.

Another topic of diversity arises from examination of the treatment of women in Oregon during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women were often pigeonholed into categories such as schoolmarms, submissive housewives, and pistol-packing mamas. Students contextualize this depiction by reading and writing about the lives of Oregon women who would not accept the status quo and who would not accept sexist attitudes, including Tabitha Moffatt Brown, Abigail Scott Duniway, Bethenia Owens-Adair, Lola Greene Baldwin, and Alice Day Pratt.

Historical explorations of this sort are not unique to the *Columbia Basin Inquiry* course. Other inquiries, for example, include nineteenth century anti-Semitism in Europe, European imperialism in Africa, eugenics, Jim Crow, and/or development of blues or jazz in the United States. Inquiry courses sometimes confront the topic of U.S. imperialism—for example, asking students to respond to the video *Hawaii's Last Queen* concerning the U.S.-backed overthrow of the constitutional government of Queen Liliuokalani and an article by Haunani-Kay Trask, “From a Native Daughter.”

In considering the prominence of diversity awareness across Freshman Inquiry themes, it is important to note the cross-fertilization



provided by integrating diversity awareness with other program goals. For example, faculty exploit the link between diversity studies and critical thinking in assigning Jane Tompkins' article "‘Indians’: Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History," which confronts students, generally for the first time, with the notion that the perspectives we bring to an exploration of history are part of the history that we discover. A monthlong portion of the diversity module in winter term focuses intensively on the effects of racism in American culture. The connection to communication skills in a number of cases is provided by an article on group communication by Jack Straton (2004). A class might make a transition from history into the modern day by examining the idea that race is a cultural, rather than a biological, reality using articles like Michael Omi and Howard Winant's "Racial Formation" or the video *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Within the modern era, diversity curricula typically explore both multicultural awareness and interlocking oppressions. The centerpiece for the former might include a film by Mina Shum that explores the bicultural challenges faced by a young woman growing up in a traditional Chinese family in Vancouver, B.C., *Double Happiness*, or *Smoke Signals*, about American Indians from the Coeur d'Alene nation in Idaho.

We generally move from the fascinating and intriguing facet of diversity awareness (learning about other cultures) into the other facet, which may be described as discovering and taking some responsibility for the ways in which dominant American culture has dealt oppressively with "other" ethnicities over time. This exploration involves readings about the reality of living with that oppression, such as Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, as well as workshops developed by University Studies faculty, like Cherry Muhanji's "Interlocking Oppressions," "The Race," "The Walk Around," and "Eye to Eye." These hands-on activities increase students' awareness that diversity has to do with more than race. In "The Walk Around," for example, Professor Muhanji (a woman) asks a female student to stand up, then takes her by the hand and walks around the room. When she nears two male students who are sitting next to each other, she drops the female's hand and asks for the hand of one of the males. He consents primarily because the social relationship being enacted demonstrates heterosexism. Professor Muhanji quickly picks up the other male's hand and presses it into the student's hand she was just holding. The students typically react with complete consternation, and discussion ensues on the topics of heterosexual privilege and homophobia. Comparable faculty workshops include "White Guilt" developed by Straton in collaboration

with his off-campus colleague Lauren Nile. The centerpiece of this workshop is the video *The Color of Fear*, in which nine men of various ethnicities talk about their own experiences of race relations. Class sessions utilizing this film are detailed in chapters by Nile and Straton, Ross, and Straton in the forthcoming *The Color of Fear Sourcebook*.

Follow-up student workshops on some of the sticky points may include sessions on “Multiple Ways Institutions Reinforce Prejudice,” “Wave-particle Duality and Affirmative Action,” or “White Bashing.” Much of the above curricula focuses on the need to help European American students examine the assumptions they bring to the classroom. This is of benefit to students of color in that it validates some of their experiences, lessens the burden on them to educate their European American peers, and provides more basis for genuine (reality-based) relationships. However, keeping such a disproportionate focus on European Americans, whatever the motivation, itself perpetuates the racist attitude that European Americans are to be subjects and all others are to be secondary objects. Consequently, some university faculty recently have begun including workshops focused specifically on the direct needs of students of color, particularly in dealing with what Nile calls “the daily indignities,” the relentless episodes of mistreatment that people of color are subjected to by shopkeepers, police, airline agents, and others in the commercial sphere.

Complementing such student workshop activities are peer mentor classes—break-out companion sessions to the main class that bring together smaller cohorts of students for shorter meetings. On the issue of race, peer mentors (upper-division undergraduates whose role resembles that of teaching assistants in traditional departments) often present two different developmental perspectives to their students to help them understand how and why people deal with race and racism in the ways they do. Mentors discuss Rita Hardiman and Bailey Jackson’s “Racial Identity Development: Understanding Racial Dynamics in College Classrooms and on Campus” (1992), which provides a model for understanding how racial identity is formed, and Beverly Tatum’s “Talking About Race, Learning About Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom” (1996), which advances two theories of white and black identity development.

Peer mentors receive teaching materials that include resources for facilitating difficult discussions, materials for developing a well-rounded social identity for understanding systems of oppression, and articles that can be used to introduce students to new ideas about

diversity, such as “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh. As a product of their ongoing training, mentors have constructed a “Diversity Binder.” Mentors are encouraged to add to its contents when they discover or invent a successful diversity training exercise or source.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent mentor contributions to diversity education at PSU came out of mentor development team meetings during the winter of 2003. A group of mentors established a series of workshops that addressed topics such as strategies for incorporating diversity issues into the curriculum in an organic way so they do not draw attention to them as “add-ons,” outside the “content” of the course, and strategies for enhancing the experiences of diverse students, in particular older, returning students who do not fit the eighteen- to twenty-year-old profile of the majority of freshmen.

The culminating projects for the Freshman Inquiry diversity curricula may involve further research, reflective essays, or assignments that connected with the social responsibility theme of University Studies utilizing community-based learning projects. Perhaps the most useful end-project for assessment purposes is the three-term portfolio, which showcases multiple projects students have produced over the entire freshman year. Faculty collectively score these end-of-year portfolios using rubrics encompassing all four University Studies goals. The “Diversity of Human Experience Rubric” is provided here:

*6 (highest) Portfolio creatively and comprehensively demonstrates an understanding of personal, institutional, and ideological issues surrounding diversity in a scholarly fashion, using concrete examples. The work reflects an ability to view issues from multiple perspectives, to question what is being taught, and to construct independent meaning and interpretations. Demonstrates broad awareness of how the self appears from the greater perspective of human experience, questions own views in light of this awareness, and contemplates implications for life choices in the personal and public spheres.*

*5 Portfolio presents persuasive arguments about, and insights into, prominent issues surrounding diversity, and discusses ways in which personal and cultural experiences influence lives, ideas, and events. Reflects on personal experiences within the broader context of human experience, demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the limitations of subjective experience and an informed view of the role difference plays in societies and institutions.*

*4 Portfolio analyzes some issue(s) surrounding diversity, and demonstrates an ability to understand particular situations in the context of current concepts and theory. Discusses personal experience within the broader context of human experience, demonstrating a working knowledge of features of diverse peoples, societies and institutions, and analyzes these features in some way.*

*3 Portfolio demonstrates a basic working knowledge of central theories and concepts related to the study of diversity. Demonstrates some attempt to meaningfully locate oneself within the broader context of diverse culture.*

*2 Portfolio demonstrates a basic comprehension of some issues surrounding diversity, but refers only in a limited way to current theory and concepts. Relates personal experiences within the context of broader human experiences, but does not locate self within that context in a thoughtful manner.*

*1 (lowest) Portfolio uses some terminology surrounding diversity, but fails to demonstrate meaningful comprehension of key concepts. Tells of personal experiences but does not connect, compare or contrast those with the experiences of others.*

### **Building Knowledge and Experience: Diversity in Sophomore Inquiry, Junior Clusters, and Senior Capstones**

Sophomore Inquiry courses span some thirty offerings from *The Nineteenth Century: Revolution and Evolution* to *Natural Science Inquiry*. While Inquiries such as African Studies and Women’s Studies naturally have strong diversity components, other courses also include a significant diversity focus. For instance, *Popular Culture*, which includes a discussion of race representation on television using Michael Omi’s article, “In Living Color: Race and American Culture,” and Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki’s *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Students in *Popular Culture* are introduced to cultural imperialism through Sherif Hetata’s article, “Dollarization, Fragmentation, and God,” as well as to material about gender images in the media, African American influences in music, images of Latin America in film, and an African American critique of European American intellectual pursuits of postmodernism.

Each Sophomore Inquiry course is a gateway to an Upper Division cluster. Once students emerge from Sophomore Inquiry into the junior

year, they align a series of cluster courses with the inquiry theme of their choice. There are numerous cluster courses available representing the disciplines of several departments. The *Popular Culture* cluster, for example, includes literature courses on science fiction, music courses on jazz history, theater arts courses on media and culture, urban studies courses on information cities, and anthropology courses on folklore. In order to align offerings with a cluster, departments must demonstrate that the course incorporates the University Studies goals, thereby ensuring continuity throughout the curriculum. The presence of diversity awareness, like the other core goals, therefore remains throughout the junior year.

The culmination of the University Studies Program is the capstone requirement. This community-based learning course is designed to provide students with the opportunity to apply, in a team context, what they have learned in the major and in their other University Studies courses to a real challenge emanating from the metropolitan community. Interdisciplinary teams of students address these real challenges and produce a final product under the guidance of a PSU faculty member.

The capstone's purpose is to further enhance student learning by cultivating crucial life abilities that are important both academically and professionally, including establishing connections within the larger community, developing strategies for analyzing and addressing problems, and to working with people trained in fields different from one's own. Capstone offerings include such topics as prevention of domestic and school violence; grantmaking with community organizations; creative industries: student ad agency; history inquiry in the context of Lewis and Clark; homelessness & poverty capstone; and many others.

Capstones that naturally involve issues of diversity include, for example, working with and beside students and faculty of the Chemawa Indian School in creating a documentary research project that combines visual art and first-person narratives exploring Native American community life and culture in the Pacific Northwest. This capstone engages students in examining the importance of identity, place, community, culture, and community building. Students then incorporate theory with community experience to document the voices of Chemawa students, members of the Native American community and their ancestors, providing educators with projects, photographs, narratives, and themes that can be integrated into their own curricula.

Specific lessons designed to promote diversity awareness in capstone courses are varied but continue promoting techniques of

reflection. In *Middle School Science and History in the Context of Lewis & Clark*, for example, community partners are teams of middle school students engaged in informal science and history inquiry activities inspired by the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The program is designed to help middle school students “rediscover” the flora, fauna, landscape, and histories of indigenous populations of the lower Columbia River Basin. Capstone students assist adult instructors as they direct their own students’ science and history research projects.

Some capstone instructors use a reflective writing assignment on socioeconomic diversity, illustrating once again the broadly based approach to defining “diversity” that is central to the University Studies goal. Sociologists have identified sets of skills and knowledge called cultural capital that helps an individual “navigate the system”—have their interests and needs attended to. Studies suggest that people from low socioeconomic status (SES)—a social class of an individual based on income—have less cultural capital than do middle- or upper-income groups and that, as a consequence, low SES groups are discriminated against in the allocation of resources and benefits. Capstone students write responses to questions regarding the presence of class discrimination in the United States, focusing on the impact of SES on the likelihood of youths’ development into successful adults.

### **Final Reflections: Assessing Diversity Awareness**

The assessment process with regard to diversity begins with a prior learning survey. Its purpose is to capture a sense of who our students are at the beginning of the academic year so that we may incorporate diversity issues relevant to their own experiences. The survey measures such variables as student perception of their race and ethnicity, class background, skills, primary concerns, hopes, academic aspirations, and family education background. The entire dataset (without any variable that may identify an individual student) is made available to administrators, faculty, staff, and students themselves within two weeks from the start of the academic year. Faculty may share the survey data with students as a means of introducing the topic of diversity or to modify or supplement their syllabi. Administrators have used the data to develop advising programs that address specific student needs, such as first-generation college students and returning students. At the end of the academic year, we conduct a follow-up questionnaire to gauge student experience and assess retention issues. This data is collected

so we can identify systemic concerns and issues that particular groups of students may face.

We also track progress within the curriculum using our diversity awareness goal as a touchstone. The third-term portfolio rubric on diversity provided earlier in this article went through many drafts in yearlong conversations that challenged faculty to clarify exactly what we mean by “diversity on campus.” The assessment process engages faculty in useful discussions about how to operationalize diversity in our classes. Early in the program, for example, student scores on the diversity rubric were low. As a result, program administrators identified diversity as the priority goal for the following year. Development activities included bringing guest speakers to campus, inviting faculty to informal “brown bag” discussions, recalibrating our community-based learning conversations, conducting workshops, constructing a website of diversity resources, and developing specific learning modules on diversity. At the end of that year, diversity scores on the third-term portfolio were up. When they dropped several years later, we again revisited the rubric and resumed an emphasis on diversity as part of the ongoing assessment cycle.

The assessment questions we pose ask students to evaluate their experiences acquiring skills in working with others as a member of a team; exploring issues of diversity such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity; and exploring ethical issues. The assessment results of the prior year are shared with faculty at a fall retreat. Faculty teams then discuss how we will address particular lacunae in the syllabi and curriculum that may improve student performance on this goal.<sup>5</sup>

Recent assessment results are promising with regard to the diversity awareness goal. For example, when asked which skills they employed to accomplish their community-based learning project, 84 percent of students indicated “Working with others of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious background.” When asked which University Studies goal their community-based learning project most connected to, 43 percent indicated the diversity goal. By renewing our commitment to promoting diversity awareness through an ongoing assessment process, the University Studies Program works to ensure that PSU’s institutional values and objectives are being realized.

### **Endnotes**

1. <http://www.president.pdx.edu>.

2. The Racial Intervention Story Exchange (RISE): <http://rise.pdx.edu/index.html>.

3. <http://www.ous.pdx.edu>.
4. Diversity materials are available on a mentor's resource page at <http://www.unst.mentor.pdx.edu>.
5. Work samples and reflections from the third-term portfolio process are available at <http://cyborglab.pdx.edu/portfolioproject>.

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*Charles Ryan Brown is the program manager for the Professional Development Center at Portland State University.*

*Grace Dillon, Yves Labissiere, Cherry Muhanji, and Jack Straton are assistant professors in the University Studies Program at Portland State University.*

*Antonia Levi is an associate professor in University Studies.*

*Greg Jacob is an assistant professor of English at Portland State University.*

*Candyce Reynolds directs the mentor program in University Studies.*

*Celine Fitzmaurice is a service-learning instructor and youth program coordinator at Portland State University.*