



Use a Weekend Retreat to Unite White Students and Students of Color

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The purpose of this article is to show how a well-structured week-end retreat off campus can be used as a human relations activity to build friendships between white students and students of color.

Why Cultural Retreats are Effective

Dear Mr. Taylor,

This was my first experience being involved in a cultural retreat. I've always been curious and respected other cultures than my own, but never really experienced it firsthand. I've never lived with, or even near, people whose culture was not white. I've been acquainted with people of other cultures only on occasion. I learned a lot over the weekend and feel that my values were strengthened, in regards to prejudice. I have always 'stood up' for our so-called 'minorities'. I personally feel there are no minorities. As we learned, we are all one human race. I love to learn about people and find it was very important to learn about how other cultures live, communicate, believe, etc.

All cultures should be respected for all the 'good' they bring to our world. I think that if more people would shut their mouths and sit back and open their eyes and ears, they would see how much we are all 'alike', no matter what color we are. That is what I learned this past weekend. What we experienced was real and it made me think a lot about my own values and beliefs. Ignorance is the key weakness of the majority and it could be turned into awareness if everyone would only care. I felt very ignorant most of the weekend, knowing very little about the tests we were given. One thing I do know is that I intend to educate my children about other cultures than my own, and also to introduce them to children of other cultures to interact with. I received 'no' education in regards to other cultures in school, church or from my parents.

I think we have a lot of people to reach, but more and more people are becoming aware of the danger of prejudices. I have been telling a lot of people about my experience on the retreat and encouraging them to attend the (next) retreat. I feel that attitudes are so important when communicating to others. I intend to have a very positive attitude when it comes to talking to people about prejudices, discrimination, etc., emphasizing the fact that we are all 'alike', even more so than I have done before! I feel I have more confidence now.

I think everyone had a great time too! I loved the great food, dancing and all the outdoors. It was a beautiful weekend all around. The speakers were really good... I met some truly great people, people who got along just fine because we were ourselves—no hang-ups, no tensions, no discrimination! It's a good feeling to know that we all proved how much we are alike and I thank you for the opportunity to belong to that.



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I think one of the speakers summed it up best when he said that if a force came from outer space, suddenly we would all become earthlings, one human race!

Crissy.

This letter is one of many that I have received from participants over the years after conducting retreats. Although this particular letter was from a white participant, it is equally rewarding to hear how black participants learn to appreciate American Indian culture or other ethnic groups appreciate different cultural experiences.

For the letter writer, the Cultural Retreat experience had a profound impact. As one who has witnessed this impact time and time again, I felt it important that the cultural retreat concept be shared. Perhaps one of the reasons why a retreat is so successful is that it creates a forum for communication. It allows people to interact in a flexible but structured environment in which they can be themselves. The retreat gives people an opportunity to learn about other cultures by experiencing, discussing and sharing it firsthand. Cultural Retreats introduce participants to selected aspects of the experiences of ALANA groups. They do not teach participants what it means to be African, Latino, Asian or American Indian, but rather provide exposure to that reality.

Participants are engaged in sensitivity exercises, small group discussions and demonstrations to accomplish discovery and sharing. Disagreement and confrontation are treated as a natural consequence of cross cultural interaction, almost as prerequisites to honest interaction. Participants are told to channel their anger at issues rather than individuals. It is not uncommon for participants to question why they subjected themselves to this experience at the beginning of the retreat. Nor is it uncommon to hear comments like, 'Do we really have to leave?' at the close of the retreat.

It is probably obvious by now that I am sold on the whole idea of retreats. A group of caring but skeptical students assemble themselves to dialogue over some of the most sensitive issues our society faces. At first they are really hesitant about what they say, being careful not to offend, but the structured activities slowly force them to be honest, rather than tactful. When their honesty is not viewed in a judgmental way then genuine communication is possible. Perhaps a weekend is not long enough for lasting change, but it is time enough to create a foundation for change. Besides if we are not the generation that confronts racism and ethnocentrism squarely, than we have done a disservice to future generations.

Social psychologists have presented convincing arguments about the effect of inter group contact and under what circumstances can it lead to positive outcomes. Allport's contact



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theory has been instrumental for the study of intergroup contact and the conditions required to reduce prejudice between groups. Allport suggested four conditions necessary for optimal contact outcomes between groups; equal group status within the context, shared goals, cooperation rather than competition between groups and support from authority (Pettigrew, 1998). I'm pleased to say that the retreat met all four of Allport's conditions.

Current research has expanded upon Allport's theory considerably and added more nuances to it. A meta-analysis of the research shows that prejudice generally declines when all these conditions are met, but that these conditions should be considered as overlapping rather than independent factors (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

What is an ALANA Cultural Retreat?

For our purposes an ALANA (African, Latino, Asian and Native American) cultural retreat is a structured activity which allows white students and ALANA students an opportunity to explore racial and cultural issues in a secluded setting that is free of major distractions. Participants who generally do not know each other are asked to spend two to three days eating, sleeping and working together.

They are asked to submerge themselves in learning about minority cultures. Because of the time they are required to spend together, participants eventually 'drop their guard' and allow their 'true' feelings to surface. A seasoned facilitator will not only move this process along, s/he will also create an atmosphere where honest disclosure is expected.

During the retreat participants are able to discuss, debate, and contribute in ways that may help them discover, share, and broaden their awareness of themselves in relationship to the multicultural world at large. Activities, speakers and discussion groups focus on objectives which are designed to ensure that the experience participants are exposed to, challenge their beliefs, confront their values and require some type of follow up action.

A cultural retreat is designed to be informational and educational. Three aspects of culture are presented on each ALANA group that is featured. 1) the cultural contributions—music, dance, art, etc., 2) problems the group faces in contemporary American society, and 3) the group's U.S. and world history. The intent is to provide participants a context in which to understand the issues impacting a particular ethnic group.

The retreat experience is not designed to be complacent. It is dynamic and at times confrontational. However, as a result of such discourse, a certain bonding often takes place between participants. A sense of community among the participants frequently occurs. This process of permitting oneself to be vulnerable and open to new ideas often gives one an



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insight that results in increased cultural awareness. Comments like, "I had no idea...," are common during and after the retreat. Even the free time serves an important purpose during the retreat because participants are required to spend half of it with someone of a different racial group. When you consider the cultural activities, minority speakers and the great outdoors, all these things contribute to making the retreat an effective human relations experience.

Since the real test of the retreat's effectiveness must occur after it is over, participants are expected to answer the question, "Where do we go from here?" They are expected to answer this question individually and collectively through small groups.

ALANA cultural retreats will not solve racial problems in our society or on our campuses and that is not their intent. However, they do provide people the opportunity to explore racial and cultural similarities and differences. Perhaps out of this exploration may come the willingness to find out more, to work together and to strive for a world that respects the cultural heritage and uniqueness of all of its inhabitants.

Planning Your Retreat

Publicity

Like any event in which you are trying to attract participants, it is necessary to get the word out. Publicity should begin at least two months before the retreat takes place. The important point to consider is if you create a theme for the retreat, to use it in all of your publicity. This allows potential participants to identify the theme with the event. One popular theme is: "unity through diversity at the university."

The T-shirts we distributed had the theme written on them as well as press releases, flyers, posters and handouts. The theme created enough curiosity to ensure students' interest. It also reinforced the retreat's objectives.

Selecting Participants

If this is your first retreat, it is recommended that you invite your white and minority student leaders to participate. Future retreats will not need to be restricted as such. This recommendation is made because if you can get your student leadership to interact cross culturally, the payoff for the campus can be tremendous. If successful you will have also put together a support group of influential individuals who will work to improve race relations throughout the year.



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Student leaders are in a position to implement follow up activities and invigorate their membership to strive for a real change in racial attitudes on campus. The birth of a multicultural student organization has occurred on some campuses as a result of having student leadership participate in the first retreat.

In addition to sending written invitations to student organizations, nothing beats a personal approach. Members of the planning committee (which should include student leaders) should get on student groups' agendas and talk about the retreat and recruit members in person. After the personal appeals have been made a formal written invitation with a confirmation slip should be sent. This may need to be followed with phone calls. This may seem like overkill, but the care you devote to the selection of participants will help them appreciate the importance of this event and may make them feel a part of something that is pioneering.

Key consideration must also be given to racial and gender representation. Ideally the planning committee would want an equal number of males and females, minorities and whites. To achieve this mix, more than likely you will need to manipulate your enrollment. This can be done in a number of ways. For example you can limit enrollment to twenty students from white student organizations and twenty from organizations represented by students of color, with the stipulation that both genders are to be equally represented. It is best to limit the size of the group between 30 and 50 people. If you are at a campus with few student organizations or minority groups, modify the representation accordingly.

Once a participant list has been compiled and confirmed (that includes the race and gender of each participant) you can then begin to do some student pairing on paper. You can assign roommates in advance. We recommend that you assign participants certain colors on their name tags for group work assignments. You can assign seat mates for the bus activity on the way to the retreat site, etc. It is probably good to have a participant wait list because invariably someone will cancel out at the last minute.

The Facilitator

It is vital that the person selected to facilitate the retreat be a sensitive and culturally aware individual. Although there will probably be a number of speakers giving presentations throughout the retreat, it will still be the facilitator's role to guide the retreat in such a manner that it ends up being a positive structured experience for the participants. As a result we recommend that you select a facilitator based on the following characteristics.

- He/she permits all group members to express their opinion.



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- He/she gives equal status to opinions expressed and doesn't attempt to stifle dissent.
- He/she views his/her role as supportive and views the retreat from a holistic point of view.
- He/she needs to be well organized to ensure the event moves along with few as possible interruptions, but flexible enough to allow for spontaneity.
- He/she is able to personalize her/her interaction with the participants, joins in when appropriate and is at ease on a first name basis with the participants.
- He/she is able to mediate disputes and seek compromises when necessary.
- He/she is able to be assertive without being dictatorial.

Trouble Shooter

A trouble shooter should always be available to handle last minute emergencies that may arise even with the best laid plans. This person should stay in constant communication with the facilitator and presenters making sure that all equipment needs are met. A car should be at his/her disposal as well as some petty cash for miscellaneous expenses.

Head Cabin Mates

It is important that a designated individual serve as the contact person in the male and female sleeping quarters to handle concerns, enforce quiet hours and assume general responsibility.

Presenters

Presenters can make or break a retreat. Keeping in mind the topics to be covered along with the objectives you are trying to accomplish, select presenters who can handle both professionally and in a manner that moves participants intellectually and emotionally.

Bus Activity

All participants should travel to the retreat on the bus together and at least one staff person (trouble-shooter) should drive a car for use in emergencies. Prior to boarding the bus,



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briefly assemble the participants and give them each a number or color. Have them pair up with the person with the same number or color. (It should be obvious that how the numbers or colors were distributed was predetermined from your confirmed participant list.) Tell them they are to sit with this person on the ride to the retreat site. Instruct them to complete the following activities prior to arrival at the retreat site.

Each person is to interview their seatmate and obtain the following information:

- name and/or nickname
- ethnic/racial background
- year in school; major
- hobbies/interests
- why they signed up for the retreat
- describe their first experience with someone who was racially different
- describe one thing (activity, food, sports) they like and one thing they dislike
- have them demonstrate something from their culture (i.e. hand shake, hand game, how to comb hair) that involves touch

The objectives for the bus activity include:

1. Getting students to communicate cross culturally from the outset.
2. Allowing students to meet on a personal basis and use the information gained from the interview to introduce the student to the group later during the opening session.
3. Preventing students from grouping by race or forming cliques.
4. Creating a situation where participants physically touch.

It has been our experience that some participants have never physically touched someone who is ethnically different. The mere act of touching is a way to allow someone into their personal space.



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Arrival/Room Assignments

Once you arrive at the campsite your primary consideration is room assignments if you didn't pre assign roommates prior to boarding. To maximize the cultural experience we suggest room assignments be based on ethnic differences. Mix participants up. The easiest method is to assign roommates in advance based on your pre enrollment. You can also assign participants certain numbers or colors and combine numbers or colors as roommates. Just make sure you distribute the numbers or colors in a way that ensures mixed-race pairing.

Tour of the Retreat Site

After the group has unloaded its gear we recommend that you take everyone on a tour of the campsite. This helps participants become familiar with their surroundings quickly. Signs around the retreat site that say, 'Welcome to the cultural retreat,' tend to reassure participants. It's a good idea to show participants where the hiking trails and recreational areas are located.

Establishing Retreat Objectives

It is important to establish clear and reachable objectives because they determine to a large extend the structure of your program. Activities and exercises should be planned around your objectives. Feel free to use some or all of our suggested objectives.

Participants are expected to:

- Increase their awareness and heighten their sensitivity to minority cultures.
- Experience selected aspects of minority cultures.
- Gain experience in completing projects together as a group.
- Broaden their awareness of themselves in relationship to the multicultural world at large.
- Take risks in expressing their opinions and ideas through honest self disclosure.
- Explore minority cultural values.



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- Confront personal prejudices.
- Analyze personal historical responsibilities.
- Share their cultural interests and feelings with the group.
- Identify strategies that would help promote cultural pluralism.
- Reaffirm our commonly shared humanity.
- Explore differences and similarities between cultures.
- Plan some type of individual follow-up from their retreat experience.

Research has demonstrated that diversity activities like cultural retreats benefit everyone. Chang et al. (2006) in a recent study of the effect of cross racial interactions among undergraduates arrived at the conclusion that higher frequency of interaction with members of a different race have increased educational benefits for students.

Using a multilevel modeling approach, Chang et al. (2006) distinguished between the effects of cross-racial interaction (CRI) on students as well as institutions. They found that students having greater CRI reported growth in general knowledge, critical thinking ability, problem solving skills, and intellectual and social self confidence, than those who had lesser interaction outside of their own ethnic/racial group.

At the institutional level, the study reported that students who themselves have little CRI but are part of a student organization that has a high level of CRI report a higher level of openness to diversity than students who are not part of such organizations. Overall, these findings suggest, that campuses should actively seek a racially diverse climate, and promote cross racial student interaction to create more informed, and better educated individuals.

Keep the Retreat Fun and Flexible—Even the Rules

These rules should be read during the orientation. Every one is expected to abide by them.

- Everyone is required to attend all sessions and be on time.



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- (Optional if applicable) men will be responsible for kitchen duties on Friday, women on Saturday. Everyone is responsible for Sunday's kitchen duty.
- Sleeping quarters close at (fill in time) and quiet hours begin.
- Be sure to read over any specific rules that the camp ground may require (i.e. no firearms, alcohol, drugs, TVs or pets).
- Use a 'buddy system' for hiking, boating, swimming and whenever someone is leaving the cabin at night. If a blackboard is available it can be used as a way of keeping track of who is out of the cabin and when she/he is expected back.
- Go over procedures you have established to handle sickness or emergencies. Bring along a first aid kit.
- Remind participants that half of their free time must be spent with a person of a different racial group.
- Make additional assignments (to build campfires, and to assist retreat coordination in miscellaneous activities) as needed.
- Prohibit smoking during the sessions.
- Remind everyone, whether they agree or not, to respect one another's opinion.
- Remind people not to engage in put downs during the retreat.
- Constructive feedback is welcomed as long as it does not threaten anyone individually. Attack the issues, not the person.
- Inform the group they will need to plan some type of individual follow up from their retreat experience.
- Have participants leave the retreat site cleaner than they found it.



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Building Lasting Friendships through Follow-Up Activities

When carried out successfully, the cultural retreat helps to improve race relations and foster cross cultural communication. To keep the momentum alive, participants are asked to develop individual and group follow up activities. Below I've listed follow up activities that were generated from past retreats.

- Have participants write an essay describing their experiences and what they learned about other cultures for class credit or for the campus newspaper.
- Have them write letters describing their feelings about the retreat experience and then mail the letters to them a month later. Have them respond to what they had previously written.
- Follow up with a one day urban retreat to a minority community providing students with 'real life' cultural exposure.
- Sponsor a community pot luck with ethnic dishes and show slides of the retreat experience.
- Set up a cultural swap shop to exchange different types of cultural information.
- Conduct some cultural games with various campus organizations sending representatives to compete.
- Sponsor a mini course on the cultural retreat experience.
- Encourage participants to communicate with a new person they met at the retreat at least once a month.
- Create a retreat advisory committee to help plan the next one.
- Host cross cultural exchanges, ethnic dinners, panel discussions, workshops, and cultural games.
- Plan outreach programs, minority parents weekend; minority alumni day; get acquainted day; tours to ethnic communities.



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- Sponsor presentations such as Black author of the month discussions, brown bag seminars, and multicultural arts festivals.
- Sponsor a t-shirt day in which participants wear the t- shirts that were distributed at the retreat and hold a rap session.
- Provide minority student leadership training so that minority students can assume leadership roles on campus.
- Promote involvement with student government and encourage them to sponsor multiracial seminars.

Conclusion

Facilitating retreats has been one of the highlights of my professional career. I've seen firsthand the personal transformation that takes place when students allow themselves to open up to this unique experience. I've witnessed new friendships, honest communication and a few moments of pure joy.

This is what college is all about, to allow students to take risks and to grow; to challenge them to make a difference and to help make their campus an institution that celebrates diversity.

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