

# Words that transcend

**A**t a time when the media keep finding new ways to segment the electorate via faith to predict its voting patterns, a series of classes at Ohio University considers the world through another lens: What is it that binds us together, even through significant differences?

Funded by a \$100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation in cooperation with the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression, the university's Difficult Dialogues Project has engaged more than 200 academically promising freshmen in a series of meaningful conversations about religion.

The goal is to give students a deeper understanding — beyond the latest sound bites — of one another's faiths (or lack thereof), says Associate Professor of Classics and World Religions Steve Hays, who spearheaded the project. He envisioned the courses sparking a dialogue that unites individuals across boundaries of class, politics, race, gender and faith.

Hays was joined by Elizabeth Collins, also an associate professor of classics and world religions, and Patricia Gunn, an associate professor of African American studies, in creating

**Story by Alison Wayner and Mariel Betancourt  
Illustration by Hannah Levy**

‘Being a freshman in college is a scary thing. It’s hard to talk to people, or sometimes it’s just hard to be heard. Difficult Dialogues courses were classes where students were allowed to open up and discuss ideas, thoughts and opinions. ... We all valued someone else’s opinion even if we did not agree with it.’

— Freshman Samantha McConnell

a series of three courses based on religion: “Difficult Dialogues Concerning Religious Beliefs,” “Difficult Dialogues Concerning Gender and Sexuality” and “Race, U.S. Law and Religion.”

The classes tackle that thorny question of who we are — whether that “we” is a religious group or our nation. On any given day, a discussion might center on topics as varied as the importance of the soul, the creation of the patriarchy or the role of religion in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Letters were mailed last spring inviting the top academic quarter of incoming freshmen to participate in Difficult Dialogues. More than 200 chose to be involved, and about 75 opted to live in Bush Hall, designated as the project’s residence hall.

“As soon as I saw the invitation, I was on board,” says freshman Randy Pasion. “Difficult Dialogues sounded like a fantastic opportunity to meet open-minded people and discuss many of the things that trouble our world.”

Hays, Collins and Gunn were careful to structure the classes in no ordinary way. For instance, Gunn turned to a team-centered approach, asking students to research, synthesize and present findings that combined their diverse views as one whole.

Fittingly, the courses all focus on conversations as learning tools. In Hays’ classes, students divide into groups of 20 for discussions every day. A faculty member works with each group as a partner in the experience.

“By the end of the course, they get to know one another, and they get to be friends,” Gunn says. “And, you learn you’re not going to always agree with your friend. They learn to disagree agreeably.”

Difficult Dialogues participants were required to take two of the three courses offered. Beyond the classroom, they kept electronic portfolios documenting their personal journeys through this project and noting if and how they changed as a result. Audrey Wallis, a first-year student, noticed she was more open to tackling tough subjects thanks to the classes.

“It gave me a great — and rare — opportunity to talk with people from a variety of backgrounds about touchy subjects that people usually avoid,” Wallis says. “I learned that these topics don’t have to be avoided if one can talk about them in a civil, proper way.”

Unlike Difficult Dialogues projects at other universities, Ohio University expanded its programming to a wider audience. A

series of open forums, held throughout winter quarter, explored different religious beliefs, including Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and atheism.

“We’re being very ambitious,” Collins says. “Through these forums, we’re learning how we can bridge town and gown and incorporate everyone into these discussions.”

Patrick Heery, a senior Honors Tutorial College student who worked closely with Difficult Dialogues, says it was the students who expressed a desire to learn more about other faiths. “The predominant interest,” Heery says, “simply was in coming to understand the inner dynamics and inner diversity of a variety of religions.”

The conversation expanded further to include prominent voices in the religious community. Bishop Carlton D. Pearson, a controversial pastor who 10 years ago was the leader of one of the largest evangelical churches in the world, came to campus at the invitation of senior philosophy major Max Korn, who conducted a one-on-one interview with Pearson for his honors thesis.

Pearson’s message of inclusion — there is no hell and God’s love is absolute — cost him his Higher Dimensions Family Church congregation and acceptance among other religious leaders.

In addition to granting Korn’s interview request, Pearson spoke publicly on campus and visited a Difficult Dialogues class for a discussion with students.


He was open about his struggles as he challenged his Pentecostal-Fundamentalist upbringing and determined what, exactly, he believes.

“I am struggling more with what I don’t know than what I do,” he told the class.

The message resonated with students — just as organizers expect the reflections and growth of this year’s participants to ripple beyond this particular point in time.

“While these students are on our campus, they will be ambassadors of goodwill because they will understand other people’s perspectives,” Gunn says. “I see great hope for the future.”

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## What do you say?

### Joining a national conversation

**A**s fall quarter was about to start, participants in the Difficult Dialogues Project heard just how special they are — and from the program’s national director, no less.

The week before classes began, the Difficult Dialogues students gathered as a group for the first time to meet one another and their professors in person and engage in discussion with Robert O’Neil, national director of Difficult Dialogues and director of the Thomas Jefferson Center.

A respected scholar in American constitutional law and former president of the University of Virginia and the University of Wisconsin, O’Neil noted that Ohio University is one of only 27 schools, out of more than 700 that applied, to receive funding for the Difficult Dialogues Project.

“That gives you a sense of how extraordinary this program is,” O’Neil said, emphasizing the unique opportunity it provides.

O’Neil asked group members to consider whether they were in the minority or the mainstream in comparison to their peers with respect to their beliefs, politics or socioeconomic status.

“In some or several dimensions, each of us is probably in the minority,” he said.

He went on to tell a story about a party he attended years ago, in which one guest made offensive jokes at dinner. “When someone makes insensitive comments, we do not speak up, do we?” he said. “It is difficult to do. Difficult Dialogues is about making us more confident in raising those tough questions.”

By the end of the day, O’Neil gave the students four assignments for the year:

- Get to know, more than casually, someone of a different religious belief, different race or different sexual orientation.
- Interact with your senior faculty, even beyond those participating in this program. It is a rare opportunity most students don’t recognize — and you never know what you can learn.
- Volunteer. Even though you are busy, there is always time to devote to a good cause.
- Have fun. A college experience without fun is dull.

— Jennifer Krisch