Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Awareness

By Ella Wickham

Although the Action Plan that I created at Brown did not turn out exactly as I had hoped, I was still able to use the knowledge that I gained at Brown’s Identity, Diversity, and Leadership program to create change within my school, The Brearley School, community. My original action plan was to write a pilot for a TV show that tells the story of a biracial teenager at an all-girls school in New York City, and her experience navigating such a complex identity in such an interesting environment. I was able to write a portion of my screenplay, which turned out quite well, but once my junior year at school started, my attention to my academics prevented me from writing as much. I do plan to continue this screenplay once I have a bit more time, and once the college application process is over. However, I am very excited to tell you about something else that I was able to bring back to my school as a result of my experience with the program at Brown, of which I am extremely proud.

Upon returning to Brearley in the fall last year, I discussed my experience in the Brown Leadership program with a classmate who had attended the Student Diversity Leadership Conference with me in Anaheim the year before, and I proposed the idea of beginning a diversity, equity and inclusion awareness program at our school. Although there has been programming that addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion in past years, it has usually been met with much resistance by the student body. The issue is not that we students do not want to talk about these issues, it’s primarily because any related programming has historically been very standard and is often led by teachers to whom we may not feel comfortable opening up. Therefore, the goal of the new program that my classmate and I sought to create was to be completely student led and run, and discuss different sectors of equity and inclusion that the student body wants to discuss, rather than what we have been forced to discuss.
This idea became a reality when my classmate and I, along with three other students, led my school's first-ever "Diversity Day", which we named "Belonging at Brearley Day.” My classmate and I were the co-creators of the day and wrote a proposal to our administration to have our afternoon classes canceled to assemble as a high school and discuss the intersectionality of our identities and our school experience. Our overall goal in making the proposal to the school administration was to demonstrate why taking this time away from class and regularly scheduled programming would be valuable to the individual and the community.

We hoped that this day would inspire more Brearley students to take action and be both leading voices and supportive allies in the pursuit of a kinder, more equitable school for everyone. We encouraged everyone to lean into discomfort and take risks, yet maintain a safe space for all to participate. Our theme for the day was privilege and which of our identities make us privileged and which don't, a discussion that was very similar to the identity reflection paper I wrote for my Identity, Diversity, and Leadership course at Brown last summer. Through our planning and execution of "Belonging at Brearley", we demonstrated how this work is necessary and transformational for the community.

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Here is a general overview of how the day was scheduled: first the high school participated in a "recognizing privilege activity", where the moderators (the four students and I) read out statements, and our peers had to raise colored paper indicating whether the statement was true or not true for them. We thought that using different colored paper versus stepping out into a circle, standing up among a large group, or raising a hand, was the best way for everyone to get a sense of who was in the room without people feeling as though they were uncomfortably standing out or being called out in some way.
The statements included ideas from six out of the eight core cultural identifiers - race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion- and ranged from “when I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is” to “when swearing an oath, you will place your hand on a religious scripture pertaining to your faith.” After the activity had concluded, we then debriefed about this activity which was met with deep thoughts about what people observed and suggestions for improvement.

Second, we split up into smaller groups and had students who were interested in facilitating, lead discussions on topics ranging from the importance of diverse faculty and food and body image at Brearley, to more general topics like socioeconomic status, feminism, and learning how to listen in polarized politics. I led a workshop on being biracial/multiracial at Brearley, where we described our identities through drawings, and talked about our experiences navigating our race. The result of my workshop was that we decided that we wanted to create an affinity space for all multi-racial students at Brearley, to talk about their identities and shared experiences. Another student and I are working on setting up this club for this year.

Finally, we ended the day by breaking students up by grade to debrief about the conversations that were had and listen to feedback about the day. "Belonging at Brearley" was such a success that we were asked to present a description and debriefing of the day to the faculty, administration and the school's Board of Trustees. As a result of our presentation and the overwhelmingly positive response, the administration is allowing us to expand from a half-day to a full day this upcoming year, for which I am extremely excited and grateful.

Not only was this day a transformative experience for the school and individuals in the school, it was a transformative experience for me as well. I learned and practiced ways to successfully lead a large group of
people and to challenge authority to obtain what is needed for the betterment of our community. Throughout school and through my parents, I was taught how to voice my opinions and to be a leader who stands up for injustices inflicted upon themselves and their community. It’s one thing to be told this information, and another to put this into practice, and I have often noticed, and have been affected, by the dichotomy of being encouraged to speak out, while recognizing and fearing the punishments of doing such an action. Through the lessons that I learned at the Brown Leadership Institute, and through the practice of leading this day, I was able to recognize that the fear of punishment or hardships often outweighs the impact that a more risky action can have on a community, and from now on, I am confident that I will take any steps that are necessary to make my school the most welcoming and inclusive environment that it can be. Therefore, my advice to current Leadership Institute students who are developing their own Action Plans would be to not be afraid of doing something that challenges the authority in place in the community that you want to change. It is also important to know that changing your individual community can be just as impactful as changing something larger, and to really embrace the fact that your original Action Plan may evolve into something entirely different, something even more impactful, and something even more special to you and your community.