Understanding the construction of difference: Cultural competency as a tool of consciousness and social justice

Kevin Pajaro

The Cultural Competence Minor was birthed out of the realization that many students struggle with how to approach conversations that involve the construction of difference. Having the proper vocabulary and theoretical background is imperative to participating in dialogues that will result in greater understanding. Through the analysis of the URI Cornerstones and the new cultural competency general education requirement, the following essential questions were formed:

1) How do we foster a community that realizes the importance of cultural competence?
2) How might students be given an opportunity to develop a foundational framework?
3) How might students demonstrate knowledge through application and engagement?

Three specific URI cornerstones that encourage social and academic growth with regard to social difference are:

1. Pursuing knowledge with honesty, integrity, and courage.
2. We respect the rights and dignity of each individual group. We reject prejudice and intolerance, and we work to understand differences.
3. We promote Independent choice, intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness, and free expression.

The university has approved new general education requirements that require demonstration of culture competency in course work in these areas:

Culture: Demonstrates knowledge of the meaning of culture, cultural development, and more than one aspect of cultural identity and social construction of difference.

Social Structure and Group Differences: Demonstrates knowledge of group identity, power structures, privilege, prejudice, and how they affect American Society.

Social Inequality: Demonstrates knowledge of discrimination, oppression of groups, microaggressions, and social inequities.

A foundational understanding of culture provides the framework to pursue other fields of study.