

“Where do we go from here?”

Identifying pathways toward inclusive community

A NH Listens Summary Report

A community conversation hosted by Oyster River Community Read
and the Oyster River School District

Facilitated by New Hampshire Listens

May 3, 2018



ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

Our mission:

To help NH residents talk and act together to create communities that work for everyone.

Our work:

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

Our principles:

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

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Executive Summary

This report presents results from a community conversation aimed at identifying pathways toward an inclusive and bias-free community. The conversation served as the closing community event of the Oyster River Community Read (ORCR) Program that ran from January to April 2018. The goal of this conversation was to increase understanding, generate ideas for change, and help participants get personally connected to next steps. The data are drawn from the transcriptions of the smaller group discussions and from the evaluation forms administered at the end of the evening. Together, this information provides valuable insight into a highly contentious topic with no easy nor one immediate solution. The information included in this report presents community generated ideas that can inform decisions and support sustainable community efforts.

Background

In the summer of 2017, the ORCR initiated a grassroots community volunteer-run collaboration aimed at using a shared book to provoke thinking and stimulate community discussion (Appendix A). The Oyster River Community is comprised of the three towns served by the Oyster River School District: Durham, Lee, and Madbury. The town of Durham hosts the University of New Hampshire (UNH).

Over the course of Spring 2018, the ORCR hosted a series of events focused on race and racism. The purpose was to help the community reflect on itself as a community, one that values inclusion and being welcoming while aiming toward building solutions that are community driven and sustainable. *Waking Up White* by Debbie Irving was selected as the main book read for the launch. Information on the ORCR program, including funders of this program, can be found on its website (<https://www.orcread.org/>).

The ORCR program included an extensive list of programs. The culminating community conversation ("Where do we go from here?") occurred on May 3, 2018, from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. at the Oyster River High School located in Durham (Appendix B). The event was open to all community members who live, work, and play in the Oyster River community. Outreach included a brochure, a flyer, social media, and the ORCRead website. Thirty-nine participants attended, along with five facilitators and one moderator.

As interconnected communities, both Durham and UNH have been grappling with recent incidents of racial bias. UNH was engaged in a "climate" study to address issues of community, equity, and diversity as a direct response to the prior year's incidents of bias. And while the ORCR initiative was not a response to an event, early in the 2017–2018 school year, an incident of bias on a school bus directed from one young child to another young child occurred. Following this incident, the community struggled to make sense of what had happened and the school district's response, the various perspectives expressed through social media in reaction to what had occurred, and the topic itself of racism in a community that prides itself on being welcoming but experiences little diversity in terms of race and socio-economic class. The district's Superintendent worked with a diversity trainer, community parents, and UNH students to deliver a Diversity Forum in the fall of 2017. Approximately 400 people attended this evening event held in the high school cafeteria.

The student body demographics of the school district are worth noting. The district serves approximately 2,177 students (Annual Report of the District, February 2018). The breakdown of race/ethnicity for students for 2017–2018 (NH Department of Education) was: 88.2% White, 5% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.4% Hispanic, .7% Black, .2% American Indian or Alaskan, and 4.6% multi-race. Students receiving free or reduced lunch were 6.2%. All of the 200 teachers and 100 staff members who work in the district are considered White.

Focus Areas for Discussion and Action

During the evening three-hour community conversation event (Appendix C), participants chose a working group to participate in for the duration of the conversation. Each small group worked with a trained facilitator. The areas of focus for discussion and action included:

- Family and Friends
- Schools
- Youth Recreation
- Durham/UNH
- Other

The "Other" group chose to focus on a variety of topics, including housing/zoning, the workplace, and broader connections to the state and nation. There were two small groups focused on schools.

Questions Explored

The key question explored was: How can we work together to create an inclusive and bias-free community? The sub-questions included:

- Have I ever felt disrespected or unsafe in our community? Have I seen others experience disrespect or feel unsafe? How has it affected me or people I know?
- What have I been learning over the past few months of conversation, activities, and workshops?
- What is most important to talk about tonight?
- What is one thing I would change about Oyster River to make sure everyone feels safe and respected?
- What is one thing I would want to stay the same about Oyster River to be sure everyone feels safe and respected?
- What do you think could help our community make progress?
- What patterns do you notice? What more do we need to know?
- Where should we start?
- How can the community's assets help us carry out our action ideas?
- Are there any common-ground thoughts or ideas in this group? If so, what do we want to say at the end of the evening? If not, what diverse points of view do we want to convey?

What Themes Emerged?

What follows is a description of the key themes of the conversation, and an analysis of the small group notes (Appendix D). These themes will help decision-makers identify areas for further consideration and action. The report as presented is to be shared with all who participated, as well as partners and decision-makers.

History and Education

Several groups talked about the importance of discussing history and furthering education on race and bias. One group suggested having a community partnership with schools, the library, and the historical society. Another suggestion included learning the history of people of various races and ethnicities in New Hampshire. In terms of the schools in the Oyster River School District, the idea of a five-year strategic framework for incorporating themes around race and bias was suggested. One challenge that participants discussed was the gap between what children might hear at home versus what they are hearing at school. Regarding the curriculum, a couple of groups discussed updating the Social Studies courses to include race and bias and starting these conversations in earlier grades. Another suggestion was to increase the diversity of the teachers in the schools.

Connect, Converse, Collaborate

One group came up with the "Connect, Converse, Collaborate" phrase, but many groups discussed similar ideas. Connection between people was discussed to emphasize similarities over differences. Many groups talked about reaching out to people more often to have one-on-one conversations. Such conversations could be about anything in general, but also about difficult topics, such as race and bias. Participants discussed that, although conversations could become uncomfortable, it was important to "be comfortable with the uncomfortable." Vulnerability and empathy were discussed as important factors in our ability to talk about bias, racism, and steps to become a community where many different people feel welcomed.

Community Collaborations and Partnerships

Several groups discussed the importance of cross-cultural events and collaborations. One example included inviting groups of different ethnicities or backgrounds to hold a multicultural night. Both reaching out to groups and, perhaps, even participating in "exchanges" were suggested as ways to increase exposure to a greater diversity of people. In addition, many groups mentioned supporting local organizations, such as student organizations at UNH focused on equity, supporting students of color, and creating a more welcoming UNH community. When collaborating, one group noted the importance of asking the groups how they would like to be supported and what they would like from the community. A few groups also mentioned that they would like the community to expand their resources in terms of food, store options, and salons to accommodate all cultures. Events to bring the Oyster River community together were also suggested.

Housing

Housing was one systemic issue that was mentioned repeatedly throughout the evening's conversation. A few groups mentioned that affordable options in the Oyster River area did not exist. One group explored the lack of housing options as impacting racial diversity in the community. Others pointed out that renting and zoning restrictions in place made affordable options more difficult. The challenges associated with student housing for UNH was another topic mentioned. One group found that housing is frequently mentioned as a problem in the area and wondered how to address it. Steps forward included education on the specific regulations of housing and contacting local representatives.

Self-Reflection

Self-work and self-reflection was an additional theme from the groups. A few groups mentioned the importance of recognizing both implicit and explicit bias, and challenging others to do so as well. Stepping in as a bystander when hearing an offensive statement was also an important action item mentioned. Being an ally to other communities also came up in the discussion. One group discussed the idea of identifying "circles of influence," and not being afraid to make mistakes as this was key to increasing skills in having these conversations.

Continuing Dialogue

Continuing community conversations emerged as an additional suggestion. The importance of increasing diversity—including race, gender, political differences, and age—was also discussed. Inviting local elected representatives to participate in the conversation was another suggestion. In addition, involving students and young people in these discussions was mentioned in a couple of groups.

Participant Attendance, Demographics, and Evaluation Summary

- 39 participants attended the event. 25 evaluations were completed, for a response rate of 64%.
- Ages ranged from 23 to 79 years old, and the average age was 57.
- 100% of the people responding identified as White.
- A majority of the respondents identified as female (83%) and about 17% of respondents identified as male.
- The group was highly educated, with 100% of respondents having attained a bachelor's degree or higher.
- The political leanings of the group skewed significantly liberal, with 96% identifying as liberal or slightly liberal, and about 4% identifying as moderate.
- 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their facilitators.
- 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the facilitators did not impose their ideas or values on the group.
- 100% of respondents strongly agreed that everyone had an equal chance to express their views.
- 100% of respondents strongly agreed that the workshop helped them to become better informed about the issues being discussed.
- When asked if they had a better understanding of points of view different from their own because of the workshop, participants were a little more divided: about 48% strongly agreed, 35% agreed, 13% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt their opinions were respected in the discussions.

Conclusion

A small and committed group of community members gathered for this conversation. A fair critique can be made about the homogeneity of the participants in terms of race and education, but the participants' views demonstrate a commitment to developing solutions that promote inclusion and a bias-free community. Adopting solutions will require continued attention to reaching out and inviting in the various stakeholders from all walks of life in the community. Participants considered personal, interpersonal, and institutional changes they can initiate to address and reduce systemic racism. This community conversation leaves the door open to a necessary and continued examination of a complex topic, where meaningful solutions can possibly be derived from an engaged community.

Appendices

Appendix A	Brochure: ORCRead Program
Appendix B	Flyer: May 3 Community Conversation
Appendix C	Discussion Guide
Appendix D	Evaluation Data

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