

HEAD, HEART AND HANDS

I-MERIT Tips for Cultural Competence

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What's That About?

Rosh Hashanah

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Rosh Hashanah begins on sundown of September 28th and lasts until September 30th, which are the first and second day of Tishri (the seventh month of the Jewish year). Rosh Hashanah translates to "Head of the Year" in Hebrew, and it marks the Jewish New Year. It precedes the month of Elul, a time of preparation for the High Holy Days, and it is the first of the 10 Days of Awe, which ends with Yom Kippur. The 10 Days of Awe signify a time for introspection and a time to consider the sins of the previous year and to repent.

Rosh Hashanah is a major Jewish holiday, where work is not permitted. Instead Jews attend synagogue where one of the most important observances is hearing the sound of the shofar (a ram's horn). The sound of the shofar reminds people of the importance of reflection during this important holiday.

Another significant symbol of Rosh Hashanah is the round loaf of challah, which symbolizes "fullness and completion" in contrast to the braided challah which is generally used on the Sabbath. In addition, apples dipped in honey represent hope for a sweet new year, and the blessing that is said when eating the apples is: "May it be Your will, God, to renew us for a good and sweet new year."

Rosh Hashanah is also a time for making peace in the community and striving to be a better person. Jews are expected to examine their lives and repent for any wrongdoings they may have committed in the previous year. They are expected to make amends with anyone they have treated badly or offended and to make plans to improve those relationships during the coming year.



Strengthening the Alliant Sense of Community

By Kumea Shorter-Gooden Ph.D.,
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The beginning of the academic year provides an opportunity to consider our hopes for the year. One wish that I have is for us to strengthen the Alliant sense of community. I've been mulling over questions like: To what extent are we -- Alliant students, staff, and faculty -- connected to each other? Do we have strong relationships with each other? Do we experience an Alliant sense of community? My answer is: "Perhaps; somewhat; more in some corners of Alliant than others; and I think we can do better." What do you think? Might we all consider how together we can strengthen our sense of community?

What is a sense of community and why is it important? For almost three decades, psychologists have studied "sense of community", sometimes called "psychological sense of community", and have concluded that it is a critical element in the health of communities, whether the community is a neighborhood or a workplace or an online group. When people experience a sense of community, they feel a sense of belonging, identity, and meaning in relationship to the group. People who feel this participate more actively, feel more empowered, and experience better mental health than those who experience less sense of community. Students who experience a strong sense of community are more academically resilient and more likely to thrive at the university.



One might think that it would be difficult, in a relatively diverse organization like Alliant, to develop a strong sense of community. Not necessarily so. If, with all of their differences, individuals feel welcomed, accepted, and affirmed, then a healthy sense of community can emerge. Oftentimes it helps people from minority or marginalized groups to build community with each other, and then, with that grounding, to bond with the overall institution. So, for example, an affinity group of African American students or a forum for women faculty of color can assist those who might otherwise feel marginalized to feel more linked to the university as a whole.

What complicates things at Alliant are the numerous other classifications that we must navigate – countries, campuses, schools, programs, administrative departments, faculty, staff, administrators, students, undergraduates, graduates, G-1s, G-2s, etc. There are many ways to cut the Alliant pie. However, as is true with ethnic or sexual orientation or religious differences, these various categories are only problematic if we create silos of isolation and exclusion, for example, "People in Group A don't communicate with people in Group B".

We also run into problems if we create hierarchies, as in “People in Group X are more important than people in Group Y.” Sadly, silo- and hierarchy-building are age-old human tendencies. The walls we erect and the ladders we construct, based on status and rank, threaten our sense of community.

So what can we do to strengthen the sense of community at Alliant? Those of us who are administrators, faculty leaders, or student leaders have a particular responsibility to drive this. What could happen if we were to:

- Continually remind ourselves, and those we work with, of the underlying goals of our work – our Alliant values and highest aspirations. Community is stronger when participants have a united sense of purpose.
- Create opportunities for the members of our teams to get to know each other, to connect as human beings, and to actually become a team (rather than a disparate set of people who happen to work in the same department).
- Work proactively to link our sub-group with other Alliant sub-groups – to share information, to learn from each other, and to collaborate.
- Regularly express our care and appreciation for those we rub elbows with daily.
- Model an approach to differences that resists “othering” – the tendency to construe the world as “us” vs. “them”, and to diminish the humanity of

“them”. How often have you heard (or made) negative comments about “those administrators”, “those students”, “those faculty”, “that other school”, “that other degree program”, “that other campus”? It’s all too easy to devalue, and consequently distance ourselves, from folks who’re not in our sub-group(s).

- Create safe spaces for diverse voices, perspectives, and opinions, especially for those who are in the minority.
- Develop rituals of community – events and celebrations that mark individual or group milestones. Our sense of community is impacted by how we welcome newcomers, how we say goodbye to those who’re leaving, how we grieve with those who’ve experienced a loss, and how we celebrate with those who’ve made great accomplishments.

But fostering a sense of community is not just the job of those in official positions of leadership. All of us have a role. What might happen if everyone were to:

1. Speak to people. Say “hello”. Ask “How are you?” and mean it. Introduce yourself. Learn and use names, for example, the names of that receptionist or groundskeeper or student assistant whom you repeatedly walk by. If the name is difficult for you to pronounce, keep working at it. The more we hear our name, the more connected we feel.

2. Interrupt the usual. Notice whether you tend to engage only with people in your sub-group(s). For example, if you're on the faculty, do you only chat with other faculty? Of, if you're a student, do you only engage with other students from your program and cohort? Consciously work to reach beyond your usual boundaries.
3. Participate in campus events. Alliant has a growing number of co-curricular events and activities on each campus – presentations, cultural celebrations, Alliant Makes Difference Day events, and social gatherings, which are sponsored by Campus I-MERIT Committees, the Presidential Lecture Series, Staff Councils, Green Teams, Student Affinity Groups, and others. These events often bring people together *across* the usual program categories and student/staff/faculty designations. And while you're at the event, take the opportunity to get to know someone new.
4. Do random acts of kindness. Tell someone that you appreciate their work. Share oranges from your garden. Send a homemade birthday card. Leave a piece of chocolate in a mailbox.

I'm not Pollyanna. I know that most of us, as in any university, have concerns, beefs, and gripes. But, I believe that a strengthened sense of community can help with some of the mess we all contend with, can better position us to solve problems and resolve conflict, and can surely make for a better ride. My new (academic) year's resolution: I will do my part to build a greater Alliant sense of community. Join me?

Diversity Quote

Individually, we are one drop.
Together, we are an ocean.

- Ryunosuke Satoro

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