

*Written by Carolyn Thompson '01 • Sent to the Alliance list-serve<sup>1</sup> • 5/4/2001*

Hi all you Alliance folks. [Leah Robshaw '01], [Liv Leader '02] and I [Carolyn Thompson '01 – all white women] have a bit of a story to share with you. This e-mail is long, but I think it will be worth your time. It begins as a pretty harsh confrontation with Doug and end with a good conversation in which we felt heard. I want to share the process with you all because I think there is a lot to be learned from it....

We were scheduled to watch the minority [senior] speak out<sup>2</sup> with Doug on a Friday evening. [Daniel Hunter '01] had been given a coupon for a free movie and dessert with Doug and had passed it off to us [from the psychology auction]. Daniel sent him an e-mail ahead of time letting him know we would be bring the video of the minority student speak out. We had intended to watch it with him that evening, but he had assumed we were dropping it off for him to watch on his own time. He was really upset with us for making a political move on his time off. We were angry because we felt we had been clear about what we had wanted. We didn't push for him to watch the speak out that night. We didn't want to shift the conversation away from the minority student speak out to the technique we were using. (In my experience this is something that happens all the time at Earlham.) He volunteered to meet us at a different time to watch and discuss the speak out. Ellen (his wife) mentioned the idea of inviting other administrators. We made it clear that we were not comfortable with that. (I said I was shy and would be uncomfortable speaking in a group larger than the one we had.) He had originally invited us to watch a movie, but we decided to leave. We were really angry and felt Doug was the one raising the level of confrontation, but decided to let it drop and concentrate on the speak out.

The next week we talked with Darlene [his secretary] about setting up an appointment with Doug. He tried again to invite the other administrators and would only set up a one hour slot to talk about the movie, but would not watch it with us. We insisted on talking only with him, and he reluctantly agreed. We were really angry and felt jerked around. After the communication circle Liv and I approached Doug and requested a five minute conversation with him. He said he didn't have time and wasn't sure he would in the next few days. We pushed and he agreed to allow us to walk with him to Carpenter. I did most of the talking. Liv was incredibly supportive. I allowed the hurt I was feeling to show, but not my anger. I was very pointed with him, but was also extremely open and honest about how I was feeling. The main points I brought up were: we had come to him to have a conversation, he had made it into a confrontation; there had been a miscommunication the first night (Friday) which we were willing to let drop, but his actions since that night had been hurtful; "you aren't taking us seriously"; "you aren't treating us like human beings"; "you are trying to intimidate us by inviting other administrators after we asked you not to"; "I didn't even want to talk to you anymore because I didn't think you will listen or take me seriously"; "you shouldn't make a promise you can't keep (agreeing to watch the movie with us) and if you do agree to something and later discovers you can't follow through with it, you need to let us know and apologize." For the first part of the conversation he was looking up at the sky and paying no attention to me at all. He gave me the feeling of being an annoying kid that wouldn't leave him alone. He got angry several times and yelled at me. By the end of the conversation, he had stopped walking, looked me in the eyes and apologized for the way he had treated us. He seemed genuine in his apology.

Yesterday we met with Doug to discuss the speak out. It was the first time any of us left a conversation with Doug feeling good about it. He attempted to control the conversation at first, but we did not allow him to. The first ten (?) minutes of the conversation were fairly confrontational, but then we had a great discussion in which we felt heard and were able to learn more about where Doug is coming from. We talked a lot about ways Doug could be

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<sup>1</sup> The Alliance, a student organization based on the older Multicultural Alliance, can be e-mailed at: [alliance-1@earlham.edu](mailto:alliance-1@earlham.edu); one biased case study using it can be found at: <http://www.earlham.edu/~hunteda>.

<sup>2</sup> The Minority Senior Speak-out is an annual event in which students of color talk about their experiences on the Earlham campus.

more supportive of students. We expressed to him that we wanted students and administrators to work together and gave a lot of examples of how he could make this happen. I have made a list of what I felt were the important points which allowed us to have a good conversation with Doug. I am glad Liv, who is not graduating, was there. She may be a valuable resource next year.

Conversation style used:

- wanted a conversation, not a confrontation-told Doug ahead of time-went in with a vision
- went in without much of a plan but to talk and see where the conversation went-this is different from the usual feeling of having to "prove" something/know all the facts-we did talk a lot before hand and thought about what was important to discuss, but remained flexible
- did not allow him to chose the conversation style (he came in with a few topics he wanted to discuss, Carolyn interrupted him when he had been talking for too long and stated what she wanted to talk about. Doug attempted to interrupt, but Carolyn continued to speak and Leah support her by saying
- "Actually, I would really like to hear what Carolyn has to say.)
- labeled the dynamics of the conversation (Doug was getting defensive and slightly angry)
- acknowledged Doug's and Earlham's strong points and successes (CCC, Shenita's position)
- listened to Doug and heard his frustrations
- used specific examples to illustrate a point (Doug loved this and began requesting it by the end of the conversation)
- used multiple examples, both that worked well and did not work well, to illustrate a point
- we didn't speak as a unified voice against Doug, but spoke as individuals. We supported each other, but also would have stated our disagreement if there had been any.
- we met several times prior to meeting with Doug to discuss how we wanted the conversation to go and how we wanted to interact with each other. We agreed it was okay to disagree and that we would walk out if we did not feel Doug was listening to us.
- we supported each other during the conversation-both with verbal statements (like the one above in which Leah stated that she wanted to hear what Carolyn had to say) and with body language
- we spoke naturally and comfortably
- we modeled the conversation style we were asking Doug for.

Thoughts on Doug:

- It was important the Liv and Carolyn met with Doug earlier to vocalize the hurt they were feeling. If we had not done so, the hurt would have been present in the conversation and may have stood in the way of reaching the level of communication we were able to reach.
- Don't assume Doug knows what you are talking about. He doesn't seem to have a real understanding of student concerns. Remember the generation gap and don't assume he automatically understands the words or the concepts in the same way you do.
- He often reads students as confrontational because they act as if they have the answers. EC is a process run school. He can't just make the decision, but has to bring it to committees. He feels students want him to implement their ideas without going through the process.
- He doesn't feel his is given credit for what he has accomplished.
- It helped to use specific examples of times he had not been respectful to students and what he could have done differently to have that student feel heard and respected. He also was able to hear examples of good communication that had occurred. Specific examples are the key, particularly if the examples involve him.