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Race Relations Project may extend to faculty

By Kristin Colella

COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER | kac395@psu.edu

The Race Relations Project, a peer-facilitated diversity program allowing students to openly discuss race, may be extended to faculty members who wish to participate in the fall.

“The issue of interpersonal relations isn’t a student issue — it’s a people issue,” program coordinator Bryson Nobles said. “The Race Relations Project could help professors communicate with their students.”

The program is run by 14 trained student facilitators who conduct small group discussions between other students each semester.

Nobles said that if the project is expanded to include faculty, it is likely

additional facilitators would be necessary.

“This summer, we’re developing things so that we’ll hopefully be in that position by the fall,” he said. “The demand is there — we just need the resources.”

Nobles said the idea to offer the program to faculty members was inspired by positive feedback from educators, whose students participated in the racial dialogues.

Due to the “peer-to-peer” nature of the Race Relations Project, it is possible that graduate students or other faculty members could act as facilitators instead of undergraduate students, he added.

The program received praise from
See RACE, Page 2.

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From Page 1.

staff members who recently participated in discussions, including officials from the Office of Student Aid and University Health Services (UHS). Instead of breaking up into groups, student facilitators conducted a panel discussion, answering questions from the staff.

"They felt they would benefit from the race conversation," coordinator Jon Schreiner said. "They deal with students all the time, but they can rarely ask questions. We provide a forum

for them to talk among themselves, and direct questions to students."

Community Health Educator Simon Holowatz said he participated in the UHS discussion panel because he felt it could improve patient care.

"It was a really valuable experience," he said.

"Clinicians and people of UHS could ask students of different races questions, such as how they perceive services at UHS," Holowatz added.

Holowatz said some questions that UHS officials asked were whether the students feel comfortable with a clinician inquiring

about their race, and whether the students have a preference about the ethnicity of their doctor.

Cary Fraser, associate professor of African and African-American studies and history, said he can see some future problems with race discussions among faculty members.

"The problem is, the ones who do participate probably don't need it, while the ones who don't participate are the ones who do," he said.

Fraser added that the project might provide an excuse for faculty to express racist views.

However, Scott Gest, assistant

professor of human development and family studies, had a different view.

"Certainly, it's in the spirit of the university to have available to everybody the opportunity to share ideas and experiences," he said.

Gest added that the dialogues might give educators the opportunity to discuss how race should be incorporated into the curriculum effectively, an issue he says is hotly debated.

"It takes a lot of collaboration among faculty," he said.

"I could see that would be an interesting conversation," Gest added.