Sometimes it feels as though public discourse has been reduced to a battle of wills. “You’re either with me or against me, friend or foe. If we disagree, you are my enemy.”

This polarization may be good for TV ratings, but it’s bad for democracy. It certainly isn’t the culture we promote at RMU. Our faculty, staff and students value the university as a refuge for spirited debate, where earnest and honest viewpoints are respected even in disagreement. That’s why diversity is so important to us. Interaction among students and faculty of varied backgrounds fosters dialogue and promotes learning, inside and outside the classroom. It is a key part of our commitment to academic excellence.

While we have a long way to go before our campus reflects the wider world, things have changed greatly since 1999, when Rex Crawley was the university’s lone African American professor. Now assistant dean of our School of Communications and Information Systems, his work as a teacher and mentor has helped to boost African American enrollment at RMU to about 8 percent. (About 12 percent of the student body self-identify as minorities.) Crawley heads up the Black Male Leadership Development Institute and is a member of the Minority Research Policy Group of Southwestern Pennsylvania, both of which are profiled in these pages.

Increasingly, African American students see RMU as a place where they can be nurtured yet challenged. Paul Spradley, an alumnus and assistant director of student life for multicultural affairs, talks in these pages about offering support while urging students to step out of their comfort zones, work hard and dream big.

But diversity and inclusion go beyond race and ethnicity. Our Student Alliance for Equality offers a safe place for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students to share their concerns. It has raised campus awareness of the challenges facing these young people. SAFE members are among the participants on the Council on Institutional Equity, which was formed this fall and expands on the work of RMU’s former diversity committee, monitoring equity across campus and making recommendations for greater inclusiveness.

Our emphasis on giving students a global perspective is also about diversity. RMU students study abroad at twice the rate of college students nationwide, and we now count 100 international students on campus. The Rooney International Visiting Scholars Program continues its seven-year tradition of bringing teachers of distinction to RMU. This semester we have been delighted to host Francis Burnside, a traditional healer from the Dine (Navajo) Nation in Arizona.

We believe in building a more inclusive university not just because it’s the right thing to do, but because it’s bottom-line practical. Our goal is to create a stimulating intellectual environment that allows young people to prepare themselves to succeed in the real world. It is a competitive advantage for young professionals to be at ease working with people of varied backgrounds. And that’s something you just can’t get from a book.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
A Philadelphia native who spent his high school years in Pittsburgh, Clifton Staten Jr. had an experience last summer that changed his life.

He participated in the Black Male Leadership Development Institute, an innovative program between RMU and the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh to encourage young African American men to go to college.

College? It seemed pointless to many of his peers at Wilkinsburg High School, Clifton says. “They say that school takes too much time, or that racism would prevent them from graduating,” he says. “Some of them think that white people don’t want us to succeed.”

But over the course of the five-day institute, man after man – African Americans thriving in business, medicine and public service – offered a different view. “Hearing these positive things from these black men who are in leadership roles makes you believe it’s possible for you to succeed,” Clifton recalls. “If they can do it, I can do it.”

Clifton, 18, is finishing up his freshmen year at Robert Morris University just as the institute is set to expand thanks to an increased grant -- from last year’s $25,000 to $150,000 – from The Heinz Endowments. The summer program, set for June 20-27 at RMU, will grow from 50 to 65 young men in grades nine through 12. For the first time the institute also will engage participants in ongoing mentoring and other programming throughout the school year.

“The relationship with RMU has been outstanding in giving these young men an opportunity – the first for most of them – to experience what it’s like to be on a college campus,” said Florence Rouzier, the Urban League’s director of education and youth development. “But there was really no mechanism to continue to help them cultivate leadership after the program ended. This funding gives us the ability to continue what we’ve started and engage these boys throughout the entire year.”

Rouzier and Rex Crawley, associate professor of communication, have expanded the original curriculum into a week of seminars and workshops. Sessions will address such themes as making the most of your education, personal health, sports and leadership, developing character and ethics, and conflict resolution.

Throughout the school year participants will attend follow-up workshops and other continuing leadership-development activities. Periodic speakers’ luncheons will offer opportunities for the entire learning community to come together and reconnect.

The Urban League launched the leadership development program in 2007 as a one-day seminar at Duquesne University. RMU stepped in the following year, expanding it to a multi-day residential program.

In addition to serving the participating students, Rex, chair of RMU’s Council on Institutional Equity, said RMU’s role sends an important message to the community and potential students.

“We’re a small private institution that cares about the future of African Americans,” Rex says. “This university is a place where their experience will be understood.”
“Don’t be mediocre.”

So says Paul Spradley, over and over. It is the message his parents stressed throughout his childhood; the refrain running through his head while navigating a path through college to journalism then back to academia; and the mantra he uses to encourage and cajole RMU students to seize the opportunities around them.

As assistant director of student life for multicultural affairs, Paul helps students from all walks of life learn from the perspectives of people of different backgrounds. He launched the Diversity Speakers Series, counsels the Hillel and the international student organizations, and writes, directs and performs in campus theatrical productions. He’s also dedicated himself to making RMU a place where young black men like him feel welcome and supported.

His parents bathed their kids in that kind of support and gave them a firm push to succeed as they grew up in Pittsburgh's Beechview neighborhood. Paul's mom pulled him off the Brashear High School wrestling team after he brought home a C in Spanish.

“I didn’t realize until I was at college that a lot of my peers never had what I had: people saying to them, ‘You can be something great. You have more options than being a basketball player, a football player or a drug dealer,’” Paul says. “Only then did I realize how the odds are stacked against many African American men.”

Spradley earned a bachelor’s degree in communications from RMU, worked as a TV news reporter in Steubenville, and taught public speaking at a community college. He returned to RMU to study instructional leadership, working part-time as a residence advisor. Upbeat and outgoing, he couldn’t help but notice how some black students never connected with campus life.

“I remember this guy from Florida saying, ‘I can’t wait to finish such-and-such class so I can transfer.’” Paul recalls. “It made me wonder, ‘How many other kids are just floating through?’ Students of color who get to RMU should graduate from RMU.”

He completed his master’s degree, began supervising residence advisors, and kept looking for ways to help minority students engage with the university. He proposed a full-time position to do just that in late 2007, around the same time the RMU Board of Trustees was pushing for something similar.

Paul won that job – his current post. His work also entails advising the Black Student Union and the Student Alliance for Equality, as well as RMU’s nascent Hispanic student organization.

The affable 29-year-old alternately charms and verbally strong-arms students into “stepping out of their comfort zone.” He’s propelled athletes into musical theater, and organizes periodic gatherings of black male students for some frank talk.

“I’ve told them, ‘Our black women are taking leadership positions on campus, but only three of our men have. Your GPAs are not what they could be. There are faculty and staff members here who love you guys. But you need to work with us. Let us help you to succeed.’”
Fixing What Ails Our Communities

By Howard B. Slaughter Jr., D.Sc. ’06 and Art Woods, D.Sc. ’05

Call it serendipity. Had we not enrolled in RMU’s doctoral program in information systems and communications, we never would have met Rex Crawley – and the three of us would not be at the forefront of public policy research into the lives of the Pittsburgh region’s African American communities.

Howard was in a class that included four other African Americans. The novelty of so many minorities receiving advanced degrees was such that it garnered media attention. Earning our doctoral degrees at RMU reminded us that sound research must be the engine that drives social and political change. It also brought home how little public policy is conducted by minorities.

That’s what led Howard to launch the Minority Research Policy Group, whose nine members – including Art and Rex – are all African Americans who hold doctoral degrees. Our mission is to conduct scholarly research that is informed by our own experiences as members of the communities that we will be studying. The data we gather will be the basis for policy change on behalf of African Americans in southwestern Pennsylvania. The group’s first report, due out in June 2010, will focus on homeownership, health and well-being, jobs and education.

That may sound like a lot of topics for one report, but the reality is that many of the problems facing minority communities – a lack of good jobs, adequate housing and education – are interconnected. Addressing one without addressing the others is a band-aid approach that will fail to provide long-term solutions to the troubles afflicting many of our neighborhoods.

Although the nine members of the Minority Research Policy Group share many common experiences, they come from diverse professional backgrounds that will allow us to solve such complex problems. Howard, for example, has an extensive background in banking and the housing industry. Art has experience in planning and project management while Rex, an associate professor of communication, is a gifted educator who has been a mentor to many young men and women.

The other members of our team are: Angela Reynolds (Foster-Williams); assistant professor, public and urban affairs, University of Pittsburgh; Frederick O. Kendrick, international director of human resources, K&L Gates LLP; Audrey Murrell, associate professor of business administration & psychology and director, David Berg Center for Ethics & Leadership, University of Pittsburgh; Curtiss Porter, chancellor, Penn State Greater Allegheny; Herman Reid, Jr., advisor and former executive director of Negro Educational Emergency Drive; and John Wallace, associate professor, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh.

RMU can be proud of those who are affiliated with this university for standing up when a need like this has been identified. The Minority Research Policy Group’s initial focus is on western Pennsylvania, but don’t be surprised to see its work being replicated across Pennsylvania and the United States.

Howard B. Slaughter, Jr., is president and CEO of Christian Management Enterprises, LLC. Art Woods is a project analyst, Supply Chain Management, Logistics, at U.S. Steel.