

# An Openness to Exploration

AUGUST 30, 2019

In this Q&A, get to know [Delia Saenz](#), Bennington College's Vice President for Institutional Inclusion, Equity, and Leadership Development.

Delia Saenz is a nationally-recognized expert in the area of understanding diversity in groups, and has been a leader in conversations about diversity and inclusion, women and people of color in STEM fields, and sustainability.



## How did you get started working in diversity and inclusion?

I am an experimental social psychologist by training and have been conducting research on group diversity for the past 35 years. I have also had the

opportunity to oversee centers and initiatives within the academy focused on diversity and inclusion. Generally, my research interests revolve around group dynamics and the impact of compositional diversity on individual and collective outcomes.

## **How has your professional work shifted over the years? What essential lessons have served you throughout your career?**

I have always been fascinated by human behavior, and particularly, humans in the context of social interaction. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to explore patterns of group behavior in both the laboratory setting via conducting experiments and in applied contexts that allowed for promoting inclusion.

This dual focus has been a consistent approach in my work. I am a firm believer that academic and everyday observations can and must inform each other if we are to practice inclusion in an effective way.

Two elements that I find particularly essential are openness to exploration for everything ranging from new ideas to ways of doing things, and in addition, allowing negative experiences to serve as immediate signals but not as continuous frames for one's life.

# How did you first hear about Bennington College and what appealed to you about working here?

I first heard of Bennington College in a social psychology textbook that described seminal work by Theodore Newcomb, a faculty member here in the 1930's. He studied the impact of groups on attitude change. I also learned later that he came from a family that publicly opposed racial intolerance.

Aside from this amazing historical footnote about Bennington, I had the opportunity to visit campus for a multi-day review of its social science area, and subsequently, as a visiting faculty for a month. I fell in love with the place, and here I am!

Bennington has so many appealing features, extending beyond the social psychological connection. Its approach to pedagogy and its bucolic setting are among the things I most appreciate.

# What has been your favorite accomplishment at Bennington College so far?

I have been here a little over a year. Among the more important accomplishments during this time, I have conducted trainings with faculty, students, and staff; administered a comprehensive faculty climate survey that will guide our institutional responsiveness going forward; reworked our anti-discrimination and harassment policy; and served on a large number of search committees.

But I'd have to say that the most rewarding of all accomplishments last year was teaching the course [Social Dynamics of Inclusion](#) to Bennington students. I believe we all learned a lot from the experience, and students

reported gaining conceptual and pragmatic tools that will serve them well into the future. That type of impact is priceless.

## What are you most looking forward to in the coming academic year?

The coming year will involve more training related to inclusion for both faculty and staff. Additionally, my office will conduct a climate survey for staff.

Importantly, I will also be involved in outreach to the local community. We all recognize that the work of inclusion is pertinent both on and off campus.

## What is your favorite spot on Bennington's campus?

This question is hard to answer because there are many special spots on campus. I enjoy walking past the pond, down to the secret garden, and watching performances in the outdoor stage (lawn) across from the garden. I also think the quiet area behind Jennings is spectacular—with its array of flowers and birds. I can't help but smile, even when I just come up the long driveway from the main road to the Barn.

## What is your favorite place to visit in the town of Bennington?

[Allegro](#) is my favorite haunt in downtown Bennington!

# What are the top 3 books, movies, or other artworks that have most influenced you, either personally or professionally?

I'm afraid there is no "top three" because I continue to gain exposure and increase learning. But let's go with the following:

- Current favorite book: Chogyam Trungpa's *The Future is Open: Bad Karma, Good Karma, and Beyond Karma*
- Current favorite show: *Killing Eve*
- Current favorite movie: *Miracle in Cell No. 7*
- Current favorite artist: Hilma af Klint