Student Testimonials

From the “Transformation Group,” one experiential component of the course

“All, this transformation group was an essential supplement to the topics we discussed in class. It acted as a sounding board for our ideas and feelings about a wide range of topics. I learned a lot from working in this transformation group but if there were two main things I would talk about it would be (1) I am not the only person who wants to have a good quality of life and a job that contributes to the social good of a community and (2) I learned to apply the active listening skills we learned in class.”

... ...

“As I have learned throughout this course, changemakers think the way they do because of a personal connection to the issues. This semester, I have come to know people who, at first, would seem to come from very different walks of life, but who have pleasantly surprised me with their common compassion and understanding. If this aspect of the course reinforced anything in me, it is that people simply cannot be judged by their covers.”

... ...

“My biggest take away from this experience is the power of vulnerability and empathy. Regardless of how different people may be, they all have an interesting story and have something of value to share. Too often I
shut myself off from other people in order to stay mysterious or keep up a “cool” image. Yet I desperately want to talk about the things I am trying to hide. So moving forward, I am going to make an effort to let more people in, and hope that they too feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts, stories, and concerns. Because that’s what close relationships are made of, and relationships are central to effective social change efforts.”

“...”

“The transformation group was also enlightening outside the confines of class assignments. In each meeting, we unwrapped a layer of each member’s exterior. The stories of our respective background, strengths, fears, and struggles served as a constant reminder that no person should be taken for granted. On Sunday night, Sam shared that he felt guilty for having few African-American friends throughout his life. Tina explained that, while her friend group in high school was diverse, she has been siloed into a homogenous friend group at Cornell—in part because she was forced to self-identify with an ethnicity on her college application. Erik, who is of mixed race, recounted some of his experiences with discrimination at Cornell. Rebecca and I are both “culturally Jewish” but neither of us feels part of any ethnic group. All this begs the question: should it matter whether you befriend ethnically similar people? Is identifying with an ethnic group a useful exercise, or are be better served by viewing ourselves as individuals? Should ethnicity be a core aspect of our identity, or would we all be better off if it were an afterthought? On one hand, ethnicity is culturally important; on the other hand, it introduces stereotypes, separation, and structural disadvantages. This conversation highlighted that we all carry weighty pasts and dynamic perspectives. And ironically, our idiosyncrasies connect us as people. By encouraging such deep conversations, the transformation group showed me the extent to which larger societal problems permeate our Cornell bubble. The transformation group also validated the
importance of digging deeper into other people’s lives. My group members’ struggles were difficult to stomach, but they are important to acknowledge.” (names were changed)

“Overall, the transformation group highlighted a recurring theme we’ve touched on throughout this course: abundance. It demonstrates the power of numbers—that five ideas are better than one. We were able to offer ideas that complemented each member’s background and strengths, and the result was powerful divergent thinking. In the end, everyone benefited from collaboration.”