

Xenia Dialogue Fellows FAQ

Fall 2011

Who are the Dialogue Fellows? Who is involved?

Current Xenia Dialogue Fellows represent almost every segment of the community: civic leaders and volunteers, business owners, ministers and faith leaders, University of Oklahoma faculty and staff, graduate and undergraduate students, educators, nonprofit leaders and others. Dialogue Fellows participate in civic organizations, political parties, faith communities, student activities, and organizations for people who have retired from full-time work but wish to remain active. Although Dialogue groups for high school aged students have been discussed, college undergraduates are our youngest participants; there is no maximum age limit. The main requirement is that Fellows be willing to use the skills learned and connections made to help build and strengthen their community.

What is the time commitment?

First-time Dialogue Fellows will learn the tools of dialogue by committing to and participating in four two-hour sessions. Several scheduling options are offered. Each dialogue group is limited to 10 persons. Following the “tools” phase, participants can take part in a second phase, which is a series of discussions focused on learning more about one specific issue to help Fellows practice dialogue skills. The third phase is ongoing and provides Dialogue Fellows with opportunities to study, identify and address important issues in our community. Dialogue Fellows also take leadership roles in convening and leading Xenia’s public dialogues and events.

How much does it cost to be a Dialogue Fellow?

There is no cost to participate. The Dialogue Fellows is a program of the Xenia Institute, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit community organization funded by private donations and various supporting institutions.

What are the benefits as an individual?

Strengthening your skills as a facilitator and dialogue leader. Engaging in challenging social issues. Learning how to model civil public discourse on critical topics without regard to political affiliation. Meeting other community members and leaders. Creating action to address difficult problems and questions. Gaining skills that can be used in the community, your organizations, at your workplace and even in your home.

Why should an organization or business encourage their members or employees to participate?

Xenia is neither religiously nor politically oriented so we are able to address issues of concern in the community in a neutral fashion. By actively participating in Xenia events and programming, businesses and organizations can demonstrate their commitment to the community and to becoming more active and invested in the Norman community without “taking sides” or suggesting positions that may appear to be divisive or unfriendly to some members of the community. Dialogue skills can also be valuable tools in mediating workplace conflict and improving inter-organizational communications.

What is the selection process?

Anyone can apply to be a Dialogue Fellow by completing and submitting the application found on the Xenia website (xeniainstitute.org/dialogue-fellows). We invite applicants to participate who demonstrate an interest in the community and in fully participating as a Dialogue Fellow. This means attending the Dialogue Fellows Orientation on Saturday, August 27th, participating in the eight hours of dialogue “tools” sessions, and being willing and able to put their dialogue skills to use in the community. Dialogue Fellows are divided into groups

of 9 or 10 for the small group sessions and we can create and schedule as many groups as needed to accommodate the level of interest. This will be our fourth group of Dialogue Fellows and each previous “class” has included between 25 and 30 individuals.

What are my responsibilities as a Dialogue Fellow?

Your responsibilities as a Dialogue Fellow are to demonstrate a willingness to learn about and practice dialogue, to participate fully in the Fellows program, and most importantly, to utilize the skills you acquire to positively influence and strengthen your community by engaging with others in ways that reflect the values of meaningful communication and transformation through dialogue.

Is this a faith-based organization or is there a religious affiliation?

No. While Xenia emerged from OU’s United Ministries, we are a not-for-profit organization that is unaffiliated with any religion or faith-based group. Because dialogue can be found at the heart of many of the world’s great religious traditions, we do have participants, donors, and Fellows from a variety of faith traditions. We also have many supporters and participants who have no faith or religious affiliation. This is not a consideration in the selection of participants, events or issues to be addressed.

Is there an aspect of direct service or volunteer work?

The Dialogue Fellows program does not require you to participate in direct service or volunteering such as helping the homeless or being a mentor or tutor. The “service” that we provide is one that is meant to foster a healthy sense of civic responsibility and inclusiveness through dialogue and meaningful communication. This is a type of service that every individual can practice in conjunction with daily life-- in conversation, in the workplace, and in the public and private spheres.

Can people participate as a couple?

Yes! While we prefer to place partners in different groups, we certainly understand that for some couples it is a more convenient commitment if they can be placed in the same group, since each Dialogue group will likely meet on a different night of the week.

How can I apply my skills as a Dialogue Fellow?

You can apply your skills as a Dialogue Fellow in just about any scenario! By cultivating the skills of true listening, thoughtful speech, and the willingness to genuinely hear and consider another's perspective before making judgment, Fellows will improve their ability to converse, mediate, understand the complexity of various issues, solve problems, and find common ground. These skills can be applied to any number of situations in one's life.

I already have experience in dialogue and mediation, what will Xenia provide for me that is new?

Many of the Dialogue Fellows are experienced in these areas and we welcome and respect their contributions to the group and to the entire organization. Xenia provides a methodology of dialogue that builds on the traditional definitions of “civil discourse” and “mediation” and these concepts and practices are certainly included in the type of engagement we promote (please see below for a definition of our conception of “deep dialogue”). The skills we foster in the Dialogue Fellows program are meant to encourage and inspire community-wide transformation and action on issues of concern. This is pursued on a number of levels which coincide with our three phases of the dialogue program. Phase I introduces Fellows to the basic skills of dialogue- true listening, full consideration of another's perspective, careful speech, and internal reflection. The next phase asks Fellows to practice those skills by engaging in dialogue on an issue of concern in the community. Phase II combines the

skills of dialogue with a specific topic or problem to be addressed. Finally, Phase III gives Fellows the opportunity to select a specific issue and develop a plan for addressing it in a way that involves and engages the larger community.

What does 'deep dialogue and communication' actually mean?

The concept of 'deep dialogue' entails much more than discussion or discourse. We engage in deep dialogue when we are willing to temporarily surrender our own beliefs and opinions through the consideration that another's beliefs are as legitimate as our own. This requires a level of vulnerability that makes most of us uneasy as we must step away from the comfort of our formulated opinions and be open to the possibility that they could be altered or changed. There is absolutely no requirement that they DO change and we certainly do not expect that everyone comes away agreeing on any one issue. Rather, we hope that through a deeper level of engagement, we can at the very least begin to understand one another and move beyond the polarizing labels so often used to place barriers between ourselves and those who think differently than we do. In this way, while perhaps continuing to disagree, we hope that we can discover a common ground and common humanity from which we can create a foundation for cooperative change and action.

Is Xenia just in Norman?

Xenia is a Norman-based organization and does not have, at this time, any affiliated offices or branches outside of Norman. Fellows are not required to live or work in Norman and we have had participants from Oklahoma City and other surrounding communities in the past. We only ask that applicants understand that the majority of our events and all of our Dialogue Fellows meetings will be held in Norman.

Can I talk to someone who's already participated?

Of course! Please do not hesitate to email us and we will be glad to put you in touch with previous Dialogue Fellows. You can also go to our website and visit the Dialogue Fellows page (xeniainstitute.org/dialogue-fellows) and see if there's anyone you already know who has participated!

**Other questions? Please call or e-mail or visit our Facebook page.
Applications for Fall of 2011 should be submitted no later than
Friday, August 10, 2011.**