

SEGUE: Diversity Day speaker Howard Ross on unconscious bias

Amanda Cooper for the Intelligencer

Published 1:30 pm CDT, Friday, October 11, 2019



On this week's episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's weekly radio program exploring the lives and work of the people on campus and beyond, Chancellor Randy Pembroke interviews Howard Ross, a founding partner in Udarta Consulting, and the previous principal consultant and founder of Cook Ross.

This episode of Segue airs at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 13. Listeners can tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound or siue.edu/wsie.

Ross has dedicated his life advocating for social justice and is regarded worldwide as one of the most influential thought leaders on identifying and addressing unconscious bias. He has presented at universities and corporations around the world, and in almost every state in the U.S., and will be featured as the keynote speaker at SIUE's second annual Diversity Day on Tuesday, Oct. 15.

Ross founded Cook Ross with colleague Dottie Cook in 1989. Since its inception, the company has grown to more than 50 team members and has worked with over 2,000 organizations on creating an inclusive culture in the workplace. Additionally, Ross has written numerous books including *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives* and *Our Search for Belonging: How the Need for Connection is Tearing Our Culture Apart*.

"How did your interest in social justice develop?" asked Pembroke.

"I come from a Jewish family, being born five years after the end of World War II," Ross explained. "Naturally, we lost a lot of family due to the Holocaust, and my grandparents on both sides were activists. I grew up in a family with two important messages: terrible things can happen when people are treated harshly because they are different, and you have a responsibility to do something about it. Very quickly, things came together in the '80s, when large numbers of women and people of color came into organizations. The diversity conversation started then, and it was quite natural for me to slip into it."

"In the early days, how did corporations reach out to you and ask for help?" Pembroke inquired.

“There are three different ways companies reach out,” Ross answered. “You can compare it to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. The lowest level is the survival-oriented level, and this was more prevalent in the early days when organizations had incidents or lawsuits they needed help recovering from. Subsequently at the next level, there are organizations who don’t want such incidents to occur and request our services to prevent them. Eventually, we saw organizations at the highest level, who didn’t only want to stay out of trouble, but saw value in having their workers be able to understand each other and work together more efficiently.”

“A lot of your work has to do with unconscious bias,” added Pembroke. “How do you describe unconscious bias?”

“When we see a person, our brain quickly determines who that person reminds us of,” said Ross. “Were those people safe, friendly or smart? We make quick assumptions about a person based off personal experiences or stereotypes we’ve heard. If you have an initial negative reaction to a person, you need to ask yourself if there is justification for that emotional reaction.”

In his work, Ross consults with organizations to set different metrics regarding targets in percentages of different groups that get hired or promoted. By helping foster cultures of belonging within companies, he stresses the value on breakthroughs in innovation by getting more voices to the table from different backgrounds.

“We’re just beginning to see the value in having more and different voices in the actual development and culture of an organization,” Ross added.

“I want to ask a question that looks at your time here this week,” Pembroke said. “When you visit a university, what are some of the outcomes you look for after a presentation?”

“After I give a speech, I hope that people will be motivated to look at things differently, and be open to try and explore new things,” Ross said. “Often after I give a talk, people will tell me that they have been given a completely different way to look at these issues and feel motivated to change.”

SIUE’s second annual Diversity Day is Tuesday, Oct. 15. To learn more about the event and schedule, visit siue.edu/diversity-day or call Vanessa Brown, PhD, associate chancellor for institutional diversity and inclusion, at 618-650-5867.

Tune in at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 13, to WSIE 88.7 The Sound to hear the entire conversation.