



Office of the President



TO: President's Commission on Diversity and Community
Professors Monica Schneider and Irene Belyakov, outgoing co-chairs
Professor Kathy Mapes and Ms. Tracy Paradis, incoming co-chairs

FROM: Christopher C. Dahl, President

DATE: October 12, 2011

SUBJECT: Response to the Commission

I am pleased to thank the continuing members of the Commission for their dedicated service, and to welcome new members who have agreed to join in the Commission's work for the coming year. I am very grateful to Professors Monica Schneider and Irene Belyakov, who have so ably co-chaired the Commission for the past several years.

You will be pleased to know that Professor Kathy Mapes and Tracy Paradis have agreed to serve as the new co-chairs of the Commission; Professors Schneider and Belyakov have agreed to assist them as consultants and mentors for 2011-2012. With their strong leadership, along with the committed service of everyone on the Commission, we can look forward to making Geneseo an even better place in the coming years.

By this memo, I formally accept the report of the Commission. Some very important work emerged from the Commission in 2010-2011. I have consulted with Professors Schneider and Belyakov on the recommendations in the report, and concur with many of the recommendations or their general intent.

As we begin our work for 2011-2012, I offer the following charge to the Commission. As in the past, I offer you the opportunity to decide how you will accomplish this work. I recommend that you continue the good work of the Commission in the following areas.

Direction of the Commission: The Commission is continuing to move in the direction of taking an active role, rather than solely an advisory role, in identifying diversity and community issues facing the college community. It is exploring its role in promoting and contributing to initiatives that have been advanced by the College or the Commission itself, as these initiatives proceed toward institutionalization. Such initiatives include the campus-wide Diversity Plan and its assessment, Real World Geneseo and, relatedly, Bringing Theory to Practice, as well as faculty/staff development programs to improve understanding of, and competency with, diversity and community issues found in the classroom and other settings.

To an extent, the evolution of this role for the Commission is still in progress and how the changing role develops may influence the structure of the Commission. One question to be answered is the role that Commission members will play in advocating for institutional adoption of initiatives and programs that began within the Commission. Another question is how Commission members can continue to contribute to initiatives and programs once they move into other institutional structures of the College to be implemented.

I agree with the recommendations of the co-chairs that the Commission should continue its efforts to be more thoroughly integrated and visible throughout the College by:

- including non-Commission members as members of subcommittees
- working in conjunction with other committees on campus, across College divisions
- co-sponsoring and supporting programs designed to address diversity and community issues

These efforts will be helpful in raising community awareness of the Commission's work and increasing the likelihood that the Commission will be seen as a resource and source of support by the College community.

Student and Campus Engagement subcommittee: The success of the continuing Real World Geneseo program must be preserved and enhanced, especially since it represents the sort of transformational experience called for in Bringing Theory to Practice. As the annual report points out, continued success depends upon the engagement of additional faculty members as retreat facilitators, seminar leaders, committed ancillary course teachers, and service learning mentors. The Provost and I need to explore the possibility of release time or other rewards to demonstrate the College's commitment to the program and encourage faculty to become involved. Other steps toward integrating the program into the curriculum include the possibility of appointing a program director, developing a permanent program name, and utilizing the Bringing Theory to Practice slot course to the advantage of the program.

It is important that assessment of Real World Geneseo continue. The several assessment mechanisms should be coordinated, probably by a program director, and the results reported to the Provost and the campus committee on assessment.

To the extent that the subcommittee members are relieved from the significant voluntary overload required for running the Real World Geneseo program, the subcommittee may turn its attention to strengthening the campus community's understanding of the PATH Awards. This may in turn increase the number and variety of nominations. The President's Office will again offer support for publicity and the selection process.

Another avenue that the subcommittee may want to pursue is pairing successful upper-level students with entering underrepresented students in mentoring relationships. One goal of these mentoring relationships would be to enhance the new students' connections to Geneseo and their retention. A question to be explored is whether both students in each pair should be minority students or whether the Presidential Scholars, several of whom are not members of protected classes, may be a resource for this initiative. Another possible source of mentors might be Geneseo's Multicultural Fellows program. The subcommittee should work with faculty members across campus who recognize the importance of creating these connections among their students, and who may be able to offer suggestions for mentoring relationships.

The subcommittee members are to be commended for the effectiveness of their efforts and for successfully applying for system-level funding for Real World Geneseo.

Assessment and Diversity Plan subcommittee: The comprehensive Diversity Plan on which the subcommittee worked so diligently has been approved the Strategic Planning Group (SPG). The Diversity Plan was in fact included in the President's Annual Report to SUNY system administration in a crosswalk between Geneseo's programs and SUNY's strategic plan.

The Commission's Assessment Subcommittee will meet with the SPG within the next month to develop metrics for measuring the success of the Diversity Plan as it is implemented. The SPG will assign the objectives of the Plan to relevant campus committees and groups to develop action steps. The role of the Commission will be to advocate on behalf of the Diversity Plan, to encourage campus community members to embrace the Plan.

Certain questions that the Assessment subcommittee has been researching -- for example, the trend in retention rates and graduation rates for minority students -- should be handed off to the Provost's Committee on Inclusive Excellence: The Recruitment, Retention, and Support of a Diverse Student Body. These data will assist the Inclusive Excellence Committee in achieving its goals. Monica Schneider is a member of the Provost's committee; through her, the Commission can follow the work of the Inclusive Excellence Committee and provide help as needed.

Professional development subcommittee: The subcommittee is to be commended for submitting a grant application to the Council for High Achieving Students for external funding. Although this application was not funded, it received sound feedback and should be revised and resubmitted. Also, there may be targeted Bringing Theory to Practice grants available. I encourage the Commission's subcommittees to continue grant writing.

Even without external funding, however, resources on campus such as the Teaching and Learning Center can be used to assist with faculty development programs in the area of diversity and community. Provost Long and David Parfitt should be included in the conversations. Programs should be designed for continuing faculty members as well as new faculty members. It may be more effective to provide the programs for small groups, such as departments or subsets of departments, rather than trying to stage a campus-wide training. These programs need not be developed from scratch; there are several models available that can be adapted to Geneseo and for which outside facilitators are available. Further, there are many Geneseo faculty members already embracing diversity in creative and effective ways in their courses; it may be that programs could be designed to allow these colleagues to share their successes with their peers on campus.

Some specific faculty development programs that might be re-visited include Safe Zone Training, working with international students, and working with students with mental health issues.

Conclusion

I commend the Commission on its work and thank the members for their time and their support of the College's commitment to the values of Diversity and Community. I look forward to working with you in the coming year to continue to build an inclusive and welcoming educational community at Geneseo—a commitment that is at the heart of our mission and essential to our role as a public liberal arts college. Thank you again for your involvement.