

2000-2001

Chairperson's Report

President's Commission on Diversity and Community

In Spring 1998, Dr. Dahl inaugurated a new body, the President's Commission on Diversity and Community, and tasked it to make recommendations to him within the next academic year. The task of the Commission fell within Dr. Dahl's overarching goal of making SUNY Geneseo the premier public liberal arts college. At that time, he invited me to serve as chairperson. I have done so for the last three years and will step down at the end of the 2000-2001 academic year. At the end of my term, it seems fitting to evaluate the progress that the College has made in its efforts to build a more diverse and welcoming community.

When I was asked to serve as chair, Dr. Dahl assured me that the Commission was to have the freedom to look into all areas of the College and that the Commission had his full support. I'm happy to report that he has been better than his word. The Commission has had his encouragement, his unwavering support, and easy access to his office. On occasion, recommendations have been made without waiting for the annual report, and he has acted with deliberate speed to investigate our concerns. Our relationship has been a productive one even though on occasion he has agreed with me when I have begun a verbal proposal with "I know that I'm out of line here but...." As a College, we have been able to make great strides in the areas of diversity and community because of the support Dr. Dahl has offered from the top.

I have also had the good fortune to work with a fine body of dedicated faculty, staff, and student Commission members, many of whom have also served for three years. Throughout that period, we have met weekly either in committees or as a commission. Much of the work has been accomplished in committees through the vigorous efforts of some very able faculty and staff chairpersons. We worked by consensus so that every member had a voice and that all members were in agreement prior to the Commission making a recommendation.

Although the Commission issued annual reports in each of the three years, the role of the Commission changed slightly over that period. The first year, our "think tank" period, was dedicated to making recommendations in many areas of College life. In the second and third years administration of acquired tasks, such as the PATH Awards, has required an increasing amount of the Commission's time.

Over the last three years, the Commission successfully has walked the fine line between accusations of being "the diversity police" and warnings that we would be ineffectual. In no case did the Commission tell the College what to do, rather it communicated to the College those recommendations and comments made by its own members in the faculty, staff and student body. Through meetings, interviews, surveys and the like, the Commission has attempted to reflect the voice of the College community, to weigh its concerns and ideas, and after careful consideration, to recommend the best, most workable solutions to Dr. Dahl and the College community.

In 1998, the Commission had little idea what the campus attitude was around issues of diversity and community. There was a general feeling that the College had many people of good will but that efforts were fragmented and that as a college we could

do better. I made the strategic decision to take a proactive approach and to begin to investigate and to recommend. Only later did the Commission collect data on the overall campus climate. The results of that qualitative and quantitative study will be available in the 2001-2002 academic year. The Commission's 1998-1999 first year report reflects my decision and is long on recommendations but short on introspection. If that is a fault, I take responsibility.

In the beginning, the Commission had no definition of either diversity or community. It was decided to delineate diversity in the widest possible way and to include but not limit it to gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, language heritage, religion, sexual orientation, class, physical ability, learning style, geographic background, mental health, age, and relationship status. The Commission strove for a community that was educationally purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative, a learning-centered community that fostered personal growth for all community members, welcomed and valued people of diverse backgrounds, and respected individual contributions to the education of all faculty, staff, and students.

During each of the last three years, the Commission has met with hundreds of students, staff, and faculty, listened to their stories, collected their suggestions, and pondered the possibilities. Each recommendation made by the Commission had the backing of all members, sometimes even down to which verb to choose.

Each of our annual reports has been lengthy. Most recommendations have been adopted by the College in whole or in part. A few have been modified and an even smaller number allowed to languish. I wish to review these proposals and to comment from my perspective on the College's accomplishment of these goals. For brevity and to avoid the pitfalls of some of our proposals that chose to micro-manage, I will discuss large areas of concern identified by the commission.

The College

As an institution, the College has identified diversity and community as dual College goals in the College Mission Statement, Strategic Plan, and in other institutional documents. Recognition exists at all levels within the institution that diversity is a worthwhile educational goal. Still, much remains to be accomplished in fostering a true discussion of diversity and community. An attitude persists, especially among some segments of the faculty that diversity is someone else's issue. This attitude also is reflected in some segments of the student body who fail to recognize the importance of diversity in their education and future employability.

Faculty and Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Development

Diversity among faculty and staff has increased although the pace of change is necessarily slow, reflecting slow turnover. The Provost has been instrumental in guiding departments to look beyond the traditional faculty pool and the traditional institutions of higher learning. There are more women and as a group, more African American, Latino, Asian and Native American (ALANA) faculty than in 1998. Predictions are that this trend will continue. The African American presence is small reflecting the difficulty in attracting candidates to a rural campus and the competition from other colleges and

universities. This fact cannot be allowed to serve as an excuse, and we must redouble our efforts to attract more minority faculty, especially those who are African American.

Faculty and Staff Development

Faculty and staff development in areas of diversity has increased. New faculty are given an introduction to multicultural issues. This year, two programs on “Becoming allies for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students” and on narrative learning circles were sponsored by the Office of the Provost. I have found the Provost to be very open to other proposals from faculty and staff. There has been enough faculty interest to justify a second “Allies” workshop.

In the summer of 2000, three faculty members and the Dean of the College attended a 10-day AAC&U diversity education program at Brown University. Their knowledge and skill have been invaluable to the Commission and to the College. I have been promised that more faculty and staff will attend similar development programs, demonstrating the College’s commitment to issues of diversity and community.

Visiting Scholars Program

The ALANA faculty presence on campus can also be increased by establishing a visiting scholars program as recommended by the Commission. The Dean of the College has contacted interested colleges but the Administration has not promoted exchange programs. I have found the Administration to be very open to ideas from departments. If there is an impediment it is funding, something to be addressed in the targeted fund drive section.

Teaching and Learning Center

A Teaching and Learning Center has been championed by the Commission for three years. The Commission’s original notion was of a center for faculty mentoring, for exploration of different teaching methods and styles of learning, and for infusion of diversity into the existing curriculum. I feared that this vision might be drowned in a sea of computers and electronic gadgetry. A true Teaching and Learning Center must foster all types of teaching and recognize the need for our classrooms to reflect not only the technological revolution but the demographic one as well. In addition, the College must make a commitment to hire knowledgeable education personnel to staff this center, not just “techies.”

The Provost is committed to development of a true Teaching and Learning Center but has been confronted by several disparate visions. She has attempted to bring representatives of the Commission, the Carnegie Foundation group, the Faculty Development Committee, the laptop initiative, and the AAC&U/Brown faculty together with other interested members of the college community to discuss the conceptual design for a future Center. In the 2001-2002 academic year, the College will begin these efforts in earnest with a dedicated room in the library and a part-time director.

Student Recruitment and Retention

In the student body, thanks to the efforts of the entire Admissions Office and the entire AOP staff, the number of ALANA students has increased dramatically in the 2000-2001

entering student class, although their overall percentage within the student body is still small. If enrollment trends continue to increase with the next few entering classes and student retention is strong, the College in 2004 will look and feel very different from the College in 1998. As with faculty and staff, the numbers of these students who identify as African American is low and efforts must be redoubled to recruit these students.

Relationships with ALANA colleges

The ALANA student presence on campus also can be increased by developing relationships with historically ALANA colleges as recommended by the Commission. The Dean of the College has contacted interested colleges but the Administration has not promoted student exchange programs.

Student Retention Committee

To date, the College has not established a student retention committee as recommended. As a College, we still have only anecdotal data on the reasons why students stay and leave. If our goal is not only to recruit but to retain a diverse student body, it is essential that we understand the issues important in retention. At the very least, data from both remaining and departing students must be collected in a systematic way.

Both the School of Business and the Department of Sports and Recreation help focus groups this year with ALANA students to assess the campus climate and the impact on retention. The Campus Climate Survey should also weigh in heavily in this area.

Alumni

The Office of Alumni and Parent Relations has promoted recognition of diversity among alumni. This office coordinates the efforts of ALANA alumni and parents to contact prospective students.

Unfortunately, the Administration has not developed a specific fund drive or a targeted effort within a wider fund drive dedicated to multicultural scholarships and programs as recommended by the Commission. At present, it is unclear who is responsible for setting a goal to establish a definite number of scholarships, possibly based on need and academic excellence, and to propose programs, such as visiting scholars. Among SUNY colleges, Geneseo accepts the highest percentage of applying ALANA students for its entering class but has the lowest percentage finally selecting our College. In part, these data reflect the lack of available scholarship money.

Scholarship money might also be increased by establishing named scholarships. Large donors should be encouraged to establish scholarships for ALANA students in their name as has been accomplished at other SUNY and COPLAC colleges.

Disability Services

Disability services have been standardized and promoted with the hiring of a full time director. In addition to the uniformity of service delivery provided by a full time director, faculty development in issues of disability has also increased. Additionally, there is an ongoing effort in Facilities and Residence Life to increase the physical accessibility of campus. Recent renovations to the residential facilities have added 10 accessible spaces to our on-campus accommodations. Residence Life also provides visual fire alarms for

students who require them, and CIT sponsored a faculty-staff workshop on making websites ADA-compliant during the Spring semester.

International Students

The international student presence has increased in the 2000-2001 academic year. Goals set by the College will increase the present 26 students by approximately 20 each year for the immediate future. The Office of International Student Services has done a commendable job of recruiting international students.

Now that the numbers of international students is increasing, we must make an equally aggressive commitment to providing for these students while they are with us. An increasing number of students will require additional academic and support services. To date, the English Department and the SUNY Geneseo Speech and Hearing Clinic have provided ESL services efficiently and effectively. The College will need to increase its financial commitment to such services. A need also exists for a transitioning mechanism to help students adjust to the United States and readjust to their homeland before they return.

Curriculum

The Administration is very welcoming of proposals for experimental courses focusing on diversity and multicultural issues. Provost Dixon is extremely willing to entertain ideas from departments and individual faculty and to aid, if possible, with instructional grants. The ultimate success of this goal depends on courses being proposed. This is a goal that can be accomplished only from within faculty ranks.

Study Abroad

While the figures and definitions are somewhat murky, it appears that Geneseo is a leader in the percentage of our students who go abroad to study, although most of this is accomplished by an intersession in England. While this is very commendable, study abroad has not been expanded to Latin, Asian and African countries as recommended by the Commission. At the very least, intersession courses taught in England should be expanded to such possible locales as Mexico City, Barcelona, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, the Caribbean, and the like. Again, faculty initiative is required. Soon to occur changes in the Offices of both the Dean of the College and the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies/International Education offer the College the opportunity to focus more vigorously on study abroad and on student and faculty exchanges.

New Academic Minors

A welcome new minor in Liberation Studies has been proposed. Unfortunately, new academic minors in Jewish or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Studies have not been proposed as recommended by the Commission. Faculty should reach across departmental lines and begin discussion of possible courses and minors. Again, this proposal requires bubbling up from faculty ranks. More interdepartmental courses and minors will also aid in building the College community.

Building Community

Of the dual goals of diversity and community, the latter has proven to be much more difficult to achieve than anyone expected. Whether it is the “bowling alone” mentality of our era or nonrecognition by the College community of the importance of community, the goal has proven somewhat elusive and movement in some areas has been extremely slow. Despite seeming inertia in some quarters, much has been accomplished in the area of community, but much remains to be achieved.

In part, the elusiveness of this goal reflects a lack of identification of the benchmarks for success. The campus statement on diversity or the Commission should set measurable goals for Community.

First-Year Experience

First-year experiences should plant the seed of community. Diversity should become a cherished part of the “Geneseo experience.” Each student should gain an expectation that he or she will be a part of that community. From the moment a student applies to Geneseo, he or she should become aware that Geneseo stresses academic excellence, supports individual inquiry, encourages involvement in campus life, and celebrates diversity. These themes should permeate orientation and first-year programs.

Many good things are already happening but there needs to be a more central focus. This year the College created a position solely to address the first-year experience. The next step is to provide a budget for the Office of Orientation and First-Year Programs to aid with coordination efforts. The Office of Orientation and First-Year Programs has revamped Orientation programs to reflect the values mentioned above and is planning collaborative activities and workshops that will continue this effort throughout students’ first year.

In similar fashion, faculty should decide on core College values that will be reflected in freshman seminars. The College should commit resources to these seminars so that all entering students can participate and select themes, such as multiculturalism, which can be identified in each offering.

In addition, we can foster true community by expanding the Freshman Mentoring Program currently run by Dr. Stacy Edgar, Associate Professor of Philosophy. Through dedication and a herculean effort, Dr. Edgar has shouldered this program alone and she is to be highly commended. It is time for the College to support her efforts and expand the program for all incoming students.

Center for Community

The Office of Student and Campus Life has taken a bold first step and moved ahead with a vision of a Center for Community that consolidates student services in one location in the College Union. Unfortunately, the extra steps required to create the Center envisioned by the Commission, a center that reflects the diversity of campus life, is taking considerably more time to create. In part, this delay reflects two slightly differing notions of such a center, one focusing on programming and the other on physical space.

The Student and Campus Life Division has chosen to focus on a programmatic approach and has made some good strides in this area. For example, service learning, an effective way to increase multicultural awareness, has increased dramatically on campus.

The America Reads program, soon to be followed by America Counts math tutoring program, has exposed students to diverse experiences beyond the classroom. The Center for Community sponsored the first all-campus day of service, Knights Work, sending over 200 students into Livingston and Monroe counties to perform community service in a variety of diverse environments. Departments need to impress their students with the importance of such experiences for their education and future employment. In addition, the Division of Student and Campus Life has responded to bias-related incidents with programs, such as those on sexual violence, and the development of a campus-wide protocol for responding to bias incidents. The Center for Community's efforts include leadership development programming related to diversity education and Cultural Harmony Week.

I have been assured by the Division of Student and Campus Life, that long term planning for the College Union, including a more welcoming multicultural decor as in the murals in the COPA Room, is being accomplished. I urge the Division of Student and Campus Life to consider the proposals of the Commission on this issue.

Faculty Community

The new faculty and staff lounge in Blake is a welcomed but underutilized area. The College should commit to making it more user friendly with the addition of periodicals and should sponsor faculty and staff development brown bag lunches.

Lounges

More student lounges in academic areas are needed. In many buildings, mingling and interaction are discouraged by the sterile and unwelcoming atmosphere, especially in academic buildings. The coffee shops in Milne Library, the Union, and Letchworth are welcome additions and might be replicated in a few other areas on campus. New talk of wireless lounges might also be promising.

Ethnic Cuisine

Jewish students, staff, and faculty pressed the Commission for a kosher kitchen on campus. The Commission proposed a kosher deli in the Center for Community. If Jewish and other students feel strongly about this issue, they should make their desires known.

As the College population continues to diversify, other populations of students will hunger for traditional foods and will have dietary restrictions. The new "Jump" cafe in Letchworth currently serves fast food Asian meals. This cafe will move to a new home in the Union this summer. Dining halls could offer more ethnic meals and more vegetarian options. The ethnic dinners sponsored by various student groups have been well received, and CAS is to be commended for the grant program established to support such efforts. Approximately 1325 people attended the College's cultural dinners this past year.

The larger Community

Within the larger Geneseo/Livingston County community, the College has acted as a resource for education through cultural and entertainment programs open to that community. The number of such programs has increased dramatically within just a few short years. Unfortunately, the College may be "preaching to the choir" in these efforts.

In providing a more direct educational experience as recommended by the Commission, the College is off to a very slow start. The College is a resource and education of the larger community directly benefits the students and faculty by making that community a more welcoming one. More of the cultural programming mentioned above might be expanded with directly targeted invitations to schools and churches. Faculty, staff, and students might provide educational experiences by going to local schools and churches to speak on issues of diversity.

Continuing Work

Obviously, areas of concern mentioned above need to be revisited by both the Commission and the College. Some projects of the Commission will continue into the future. These include administration of the PATH Awards and sponsorship of ethnic months and the survey of campus climate. The quantitative and qualitative data collected from these surveys will need to be analyzed before we have an accurate picture of the College as a whole. It is planned that this process will be repeated every three years to provide two measures of change, one over time and one as a class progresses from freshman to senior status.

The AAC&U/Brown team will continue its invaluable efforts, especially in the area of curricular development. Additional faculty and staff will attend similar development programs and increase this pool of expertise.

As mentioned previously, the Commission and the College must focus on building community. This should commence with agreement on a community statement of values, goals, and conduct between community members. The conversation surrounding such a statement can become the stimulus for further exploration of ideas for creating that community. Discussion should be also broadened and some consensus reached on issues such as the Teaching and Learning Center and the Center for Community.

Respectfully,
Robert E. Owens, Jr., Ph.D.
Chair, President's Commission on Diversity
and Community