

Council for Equity and Community Town Hall Meeting

December 1, 2008

12:00 – 2:00 pm

Comments/suggestions/ideas/fragments gleaned from the open forum...

Carolina Hernandez posed a question to the audience to start the discussion: **Should there be a compulsory diversity experience for all first-year students, and if so, what should it be?**

Student: Rather than a course, make it community service; this is mandatory in his high school in order to graduate.

Bill Scott, professor of Africana studies: The classroom strikes me as the place where we really have an impact, where we expose students to new ideas. Volunteerism alone falls short of what we have to do here.

Rather than a single course, we need to saturate the curriculum with courses with a diversity content.

We need a critical mass of faculty who are trained in thinking about such issues. The worst thing we could do is try to conduct conversations of this type without the proper expertise. We need more faculty with expertise in these areas.

We wouldn't expect someone to be ready to teach materials science after just 12 weeks, so we shouldn't expect a 12-week seminar to turn faculty members into diversity experts. A seminar is not a solution to the inadequate depth of expertise we have in this area.

Service learning is wonderful, but it can't happen in isolation. It won't be transformative if it's not grounded in something significant and if our efforts are not comprehensive.

We didn't learn our values about race and gender in the classroom, so we're not going to unlearn them by using the classroom as a lab.

It's much bigger than a seminar.

We don't have time to wait for new faculty. How will we utilize the resources that we have?

Offer credit or some other incentive for service learning?

Student: I had a huge community services requirement in high school; doing it here would help students learn that it's a good thing.

What are ways we can reward people for community service?

We can't stop discussing diversity when orientation is over. Three days is not enough time.

NCBI (National Coalition Building Institute) can come onto campus and "train the trainers."

When it's mandatory, even if you hate it you still learn something.

Whatever is initiated should include sophomores, juniors, seniors, staff, and faculty; include those that are here now, not just the new freshmen coming in.

Ian Birky, counselor: People must be open to change. We need to talk to the students about giving up their prejudices.

John Smeaton: We can't force people to learn. But we can differentiate between learning and behavior, and try to shape behavior.

Sometimes people resist as a function of simply not knowing. We must give them the opportunity to learn; even if they resist now, at some point they will be able to tap into what we expose them to.

Student: If it's mandatory, it's got to be fun (for example, new foods to try in the dining hall).

We need to permeate and transform the institution as a whole, not expect the same old people to do it.

Take the relevant courses already being offered and make them big and bold (or boxed) in the course listing so students are aware of them. This can happen right now.

Carolina posed the next question: **What specific actions should Lehigh pursue in the recruitment and application process in order to create a more diverse student community?**

Socioeconomic class plays a bigger role than race. Students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to struggle more here and feel less a part of the community.

Henry Odi: We must focus on more than just race and gender.

Student: I attended one of the top high schools in Philadelphia, its graduates attend the best colleges in the country, but Lehigh has never been a recruiting presence there. Why?

Admissions counselor: Some schools are just not welcoming to Lehigh, despite our efforts to get in. If you know of students in your community who would be good fits for Lehigh, come to our office and tell us about them.

Leon Washington, dean of admissions: In the past 3 years we have done a tremendous job of increasing our diversity efforts. Beyond the admissions process, we have to ask this: Once students get here, what kind of climate do they encounter, and how can we make the climate one that embraces everyone no matter where they come from? What is the kind of community that we want to be?

Diversity Life Weekend is a great weekend, students decide to attend Lehigh based on that experience, but then they show up here and say... This is not what I expected.

D-Life Weekend is hard to replicate for the rest of the year because the numbers just aren't there.

Timothy Gardner: Lehigh can't be that because it *isn't* that.

Is there something about D-Life Weekend that's a farce? Are we tricking kids into coming to Lehigh?

Leon: Do we not do D-Life and run the risk of a lower yield, or do we find ways to replicate those kinds of experiences for students?

Carolina posed the next question: **Should Lehigh appoint, as the CEC recently recommended, a chief diversity officer at the level of vice president (VPEC)? And what would we expect this person to accomplish?**

A VPEC would help with an audit of the resources we already have here. They would be able to keep a finger on the pulse of this very, very important issue.

If we get a VPEC, it can't result in the rest of us abdicating our responsibilities.

Roy Gruver: There are a number of people who have been working on this issue for many years without the kind of support, direction, and authority that this kind of position would bring, and we see how effective we've been—not very.

Student: How do we train the gryphons and other campus leaders to talk about social justice issues and deal with them? Also, we need to reeducate our professors, especially those who are racist and sexist and say things in the classroom that are not appropriate.

People need to know that their voices are really being heard.

Yasmin Bugaighis: I have put together a proposal for a student center with an education element to it. Now is a good time; with the STEPS building going up, there's going to be some flex space available.

Zoellner is insanely expensive, Grace Hall is expensive, Packard is a classroom, Lamberton's sound system has been a detriment—students need a big programming space.

Possibly by spring break, but definitely by summer, there will be new sound in Lamberton.

We need a space where groups like the Black Student Union, the Asian Cultural Society, and University Productions can work together. This will allow students to meet others on an informal basis who are from organizations different than theirs. Right now all of these groups are segregated.

We have the staffing and resources to provide leadership training, but we do not have the spaces to do it properly.

Asa Packer Dining Room is the place that creates synergy between faculty, staff, and students. We need a space about 50 times that size that would do the same thing.

If the university has money for a student center, why aren't we bringing in more socioeconomically disadvantaged students?

A student center alone won't do it. We must put a cohesive structure and community in place.

Nowadays when the Admissions staff is leading tours of the UC, they have to be very intentional to point out the Rainbow Room; we want a place where you can readily see that there's a Rainbow Room and other student organizations.

We have to include things like social justice and multicultural issues in our leadership training. Some schools have classes that Greek leaders need to take.

Student: As a sorority member, I favor extending the Panhellenic Council meetings to 2 hours, the first for conducting business and the second for a class on social justice issues.

MJ Bishop: Extend training to class officers and other student leaders as well.

The only way change will take place is if people confront it on a daily basis.

Coverage of the town hall on the Inside Lehigh home page:

Council for Equity and Community hears from campus community

Much of Monday's two-hour discussion focused on whether Lehigh should require community service and/or courses on racial and gender studies.

A mid-day town hall meeting called by the university's [Council for Equity and Community](#) (CEC) was held Monday to gather feedback from the Lehigh community on a series of initiatives identified in the panel's first town hall meeting in early September.

The gathering drew roughly 100 students, staff and faculty members, and primarily focused on a comprehensive action plan that is expected to be completed by the year's end and submitted to Lehigh President Alice P. Gast.

Michael Raposa, professor of religion studies and CEC co-chair, welcomed attendees and encouraged them to share their opinions with the 14-member panel that was convened in late March to build an inclusive campus community.

"Our purpose here today is to listen and respond—we envision this as an open dialogue in which you do most of the talking," he said.

Carolina Hernandez, director of Lehigh's Community Service Office and CEC co-chair, initiated the discussion by posing questions on possible initiatives that included implementing a proposed mandatory curricular requirement on racial and gender studies, hiring a chief diversity officer, designating a welcoming and inclusive student center, and recruiting a more diverse student body through the admissions process.

Need for "intellectual depth"

The bulk of the two-hour discussion focused on issues related to the proposed required curriculum and mandatory community service component that could begin with the university's integrated first-year experience.

William Scott, professor of history and director of Lehigh's Africana Studies program, suggested these requirements might be part of a broader range of options, but felt "the classroom strikes me as the place where we really have an impact on a young person's mind, and where we can expose them to new and exciting ideas."

Seth Moglen, associate professor of English and instructor in the Africana Studies program, concurred, arguing that students are "speaking for a need for sophisticated conversation," and expressed a concern that significant discussions on issues related to diversity would not be grounded in "a deep, solid base of knowledge" that could be provided by a dedicated faculty member.

"We need to be very careful about creating a program that lacks intellectual depth," he

said. “I just don’t see a seminar as a solution.”

His comments prompted CEC member Yaba Blay, director of the university’s Multicultural Studies program, to ask: “If it is bigger than a seminar, are we talking new faculty members? And until we have the resources to do that, will we utilize the resources we do have?”

Lori Bolden McClaind, assistant dean of Lehigh’s Office of the First Year Experience, agreed that new student orientation provided an opportunity for discussion, but cautioned that it could only be viewed as an introduction.

“It can’t stop there,” she said. “It has to continue through a student’s academic experience at Lehigh.”

Most of the students who spoke at the meeting supported mandatory community service learning experiences, as well as a clear declaration of that requirement through the admissions process so that Lehigh would attract a civic-minded student body.

Zahir Carrington ’10, a sociology/anthropology major from Philadelphia, raised the issue of Lehigh’s recruitment efforts and questioned the university’s commitment to attracting more students of color.

A series of additional questions about the recruitment process were responded to by Dean of Admissions Leon Washington, as well as several members of the admissions staff, who outlined the university’s efforts to attract students from diverse backgrounds from all over the world.

Washington and others lauded the success of events such as Diversity Weekend, but several attendees questioned why the spirit of inclusiveness could not be sustained once students matriculate.

“D-Life Weekend is one of the highest yield events—where students select us,” Washington said. “We really are holding our own against highly selective universities all over the country—and we’re talking about a very small number of students who are very heavily recruited and in some cases, bought. My question is, do we not do that event, and have even lower numbers?”

Throughout the discussion, the CEC co-chairs reminded attendees that this is an ongoing dialogue, and that students, staff and faculty should feel free to continue to share opinions and suggestions with CEC members.

Recognizing that many do not place great faith in committees, Raposa said “there is something quite different about this motley crew. The president has convened this group, and we are submitting our directives, with budgets attached to them. I can’t get into a time machine and jet forward a few years and tell you how this is going to work out, but I do feel there is something about this group and what we’re committed to accomplishing.”

--Linda Harbrecht

*****Estimated attendance: 100