Appendix 2
Feedback from Open Forum for Students
11/19/08

Overall questions / comments:

• Why is SSU recruiting from predominantly white schools and those in higher economic brackets?

• How can we get faculty more involved in activities and clubs that support diverse students?

• What do we mean by diversity? / We emphasize diversity here already but we don’t know [about?] each other or [our] events. / We need validation and acknowledgment is important./ We are complex society. Strive for awareness of diversity. / Race is not the only diversity issue. Don’t limit ourselves to one issue but look at how they intersect. Don’t be exclusionary.

• Campus lack of diversity leaves you uncomfortable. You’re often in class by yourself. Don’t people realize you need diversity to prepare for the working world? That does not feel supported here. It’s hurtful when your own university ignores you

• How do we get beyond just numbers and statistics? / SSU has a quantitative focus rather than qualitative value that diversity brings to campus.

• Diversity makes you “well-rounded” / Majority don’t see diversity as valuable.

* Some students from diverse backgrounds stay at SSU to gain skills to prepare them for working in a hostile environment

• What are [white] students going to do when they get out into the world and enter a very diverse workplace? They are going to be really unprepared to work with others who are not like them.

• All people and all experiences have intrinsic value and should be acknowledged and supported. Diversity is not a “problem,” although it is often treated as one.

• Student power on campus lacks solidarity. I’m hurt by racism too as a white man. Encourage students not to hide and to use [their] voices.

• Can’t throw diversity at people. We need to make people interested, get the people who are not here interested in diversity.

• There was a call for ways to help students learn to speak comfortably about race.
One student pointed out that white, suburban students “aren’t cultured”: they come from insulated, provincial backgrounds and can’t deal with difference. “We aren’t cultured about other people.”

One student noted that there are only 180 Black students at SSU, out of a population of 8500; she feels strongly that no one (apart from her friends) has acknowledged her being at SSU. The ignorant and intrusive comments from white roommates make Black students feel unwelcome and put on the spot.

More respect for everyone is needed, as individuals, not as members of a particular race or community. Maybe we need to start with simple respect. It is not [just] a diversity question. I’m a junior. It boils down to lack of respect. We need to define what diversity means to us. Culture is only tolerated. Should not be about statistics but our quality of experience here. I don’t see race, should look at human beings without labels and stereotypes.

In the attempt [to support] diversity we can be exclusionary. [Avoid] blaming the individual and discrediting of our experience as minorities.

Academic readiness [seems to be] more important than diversity [in terms of admission to SSU]

Those making decisions like admissions, they need to be here [at the forum]. This conversation makes Caucasians uncomfortable and white people tend to leave the room.

When you aren’t comfortable where you are you won’t do well. Why waste my chance for college? People are segregated. “I’d be lying if I said I’m enjoying college.” Why should I pay so much and not enjoy my college years?

[There has been] no forum to share experiences as students of color.

Our access to resources is limited.

Some diversity here is hidden.

What about sexual assault on campus? [We] need a safer campus

No one is trying to keep you here once you’re here. I am “very disappointed” in the campus. A first time freshman [comment]: my counselor in LA said it was a good school, I’m used to a diverse neighborhood & thought I’d step outside my comfort zone. EOP helped some.

“Our (SSU) reputation is ruined in some communities” (because we go home and tell [about] our experience here.)

On a 1-10 scale give SSU a 5. [in terms of its success with diversity]
This meeting is making progress.

**Areas of concern:**

- There is enormous cultural insensitivity of students who come to SSU and live in the dorms (need for a training program as students move in). The first week here I was called a “nigger” and my roommates called me “Aunt Jemima.” I should not be treated that way. I am paying the same, I have the same grades. I am equal. “Why don’t you wash your hair everyday?” directed at African-American female students in the dorms. On going disrespectful comments. “Why don’t you bathe?” Questions about your hair. “Why [is] your butt so big?” Questions may come in a joking way but “it’s not funny.”

- We (Black students) get looks (stares) like we don’t belong here. Why do Latino students have to listen to “beaner” jokes or answer questions about, “Why do Mexicans.” Freshman [who is] transferring due to lack of diversity [said that] the campus is unwelcoming. “N***, Aunt Jemima, won’t make it here, won’t make it in the workplace, don’t belong here” and always the weird stares when you walk around campus. You get those looks like, why are you here, you don’t belong. Campus needs to put out more strongly worded [statement on the] need for respect of diverse people.

- I am your equal but you expect me to “go on the under about how I really feel here” so I won’t upset you. I get tired of same conversation. The white students don’t have to go outside their comfort zone here.

- Campus needs to educate the whole student body. Freshman seminar doesn’t educate about this, that class is really a waste of time.

- Police (campus and local) stop people who are Black. N*** scratched on car, campus police attitude, community not friendly and [challenge of] DWB (driving while black)

- If we continue to build $800 [expensive] housing then we are going to continue to attract the same [affluent students]. The kind of dorms SSU has attracts students from certain affluent areas.

- Why are we going to so many white high schools to get students? Why not go to some diverse high schools? You’re not getting different perspectives. Other students see you and assume you’re from Compton and then say you’re wrong for reacting to disrespectful comments.

- The SSU website images are more diverse that the actual campus (portray the school as it actually is) “I’m on every event flyer, but they are lying.” You think you’re walking into a diverse environment. Sell our school as it is.
• There is no support for diverse student populations which then results in them transferring to another school.

• Given limited diversity, student often become the spokesperson for their race or group in the classroom. You’re invisible here when you’re asked to be spokesperson for your race because that means you’re not seen as an individual, you’re just part of a stereotyped group.

• We need to make the entire campus comfortable talking about race.

* The University does not support cultural events (in conjunction with the community). Diversity Week is not taken seriously by SSU. Disappointing lack of campus participation in cultural events overall. Does not feel like we have campus support. Usually see only our own group in attendance. The CSAs could focus more and give a voice to diverse events, housing in general could do more. Campus could push those events with faculty and staff. University should help clubs publicize events. University is slacking.

• How can we do a better job of retention?

* The efforts to address diversity on the campus not disappear after the WASC accreditation is completed.

• Look into the Outreach Office and who is sent to represent SSU (is it reflect of the diversity we seek?)

• Professors aren’t trained to work with students from a wide variety of communities and regularly display their ignorance. Comments from a professor about lynching. A student recalls another professor saying: “I really value the time I spent living in San Francisco because I learned to speak to people as equals.” This suggests the hidden elitism that permeates academia: social, class, and intellectual hierarchies that devalue student contributions and the contributions of those with less education in general.

• Lack of diversity training for faculty is a problem. Need infrastructure to train professors and deal with different backgrounds. Need more faculty training so I don’t have to be put on spot as spokesperson for “my race.” Also asked to be spokesperson by faculty member.

• Another student stated that the recent diversity workshops for faculty and staff have been unsuccessful because they’ve been too abstract, too general, too “academic.” She referenced the “categories of diversity” that are often listed at such workshops. The Campus Climate Committee (CCC) planned diversity training [but] only the same 10 faculty showed up, the same “bullshit” training. Need to find a better way to train. There are planned faculty events but few faculty showed up and [it is always] the same ones. Some boring BS, same training. Need better quality of training.

**Things that are working:**
• AS grants to clubs
• AS efforts
• EOP
• Support that fosters student leaders
• Students value the comfort zones provided by BSU, MeCHa, and all students on campus are invited to join them.
• Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) successfully used Freshman Seminars to share their panel and fraternities and sororities were [also] required to come
• I turned my experience positive by collaborating with departments and faculty like CALS, AMCS, NAMS, International [Students].

Potential action items / suggestions:

• Hold a campus-wide meeting on respect
• Reinstitute Unity through Diversity Week every Fall semester so that student clubs work together in planning and attending each other’s events and engage the rest of the campus community / What about a diversity week? All classes campus wide discuss?
• Ensure collaboration between academic departments and those planning the history weeks
• Create an African-American Studies department or minor (courses specifically dealing with African-American experience)
• Provide support to the diverse students who are actually here
• How can we help publicize all the events that are occurring on campus (and get better information to those living in the Residential Community)?
• Engage fraternities and sororities (and provide them with diversity workshops)
• Actively recruit at schools in Oakland and Los Angeles with diverse student bodies
• Create stronger ties with the community, who in turn would support diverse student groups and interests
• Students can use clubs to build diversity.
• Don’t cut funding for EOP

• Provide support for cultural clubs to work together and have better publicized events

• Have students assist those in applying to SSU – visit high schools, assist students in filling out application and financial aid forms

• Focus resources on retention, not just outreach

• Recruit a more diverse faculty

• Provide [more cost-effective] housing opportunities for low-income students

• Train faculty and staff in sensitivity/diversity (especially re: comments and incorrect assumptions and having diverse students act as “spokespeople” for their groups).

• Create a Multi-Cultural Student Council or equivalent to help student leaders to work together.

• Provide more multicultural programming

  Students (of color) should stop funding (white) Greek system dances and events.

• Forge stronger ties to the community particularly the Buddhist temple and the Japanese-American League

• Continue to have forums for students that support dialog about diversity

• Teachers and the university administration should announce, support, and attend cultural events put on by the various student groups.

• Campus needs to “walk the talk” on diversity, not just put up a few banners for Black History Month.

• Get channel 68 here on campus (as there is no black television channel here).

While there were no comments that related to the Center for Gender, Culture and Sexuality directly, funding and staffing this center could begin to address a number of the issues that students raised.

Based on notes taken by from Barbara Lesch McCaffry, Sandra Shand, Joyce Suzuki, and Merith Weisman,
MEMO

TO: Senate Ad-Hoc Diversity Committee
FROM: Merith Weisman
RE: Notes on Open Forum for Students on Diversity, 11/19/08
DATE: November 25, 2008

The mission of Sonoma State University is to prepare students to be learned men and women who:

• have a foundation for life-long learning,
• have a broad cultural perspective,
• have a keen appreciation of intellectual and aesthetic achievements,
• will be active citizens and leaders in society,
• are capable of pursuing fulfilling careers in a changing world, and
• are concerned with contributing to the health and well-being of the world at large.

While it is arguable that all of the bullet points in our mission are connected to diversity, I listened to the Students Open Forum on diversity with the italicized ones in mind. Related (paraphrased) comments include:

1. The workplace is diverse.
2. To get different perspectives, you need different kinds of people.
3. White students are ignorant to diversity – not by choice.
4. White kids are asking, “Where are all the minorities?”
5. People are coming to college to get different perspectives but that’s not what I’m getting here.
6. I’m a white man and I’ve been hurt by racism.
7. All of us are oppressed and being taught oppression.
8. Diversity fosters creativity; allows students to do better in school.

I also listened for action and “actionish” items. Comments (paraphrased) include:

1. We need to provide housing opportunities for low-income students.
2. We need to improve infrastructure; train faculty and staff in sensitivity/diversity.
3. We need to increase collaboration with academic departments; faculty need to get involved.
4. We need an African-American Studies Department to address ignorance.
5. We need a Multi-Cultural Student Council or something to help student leaders to work together.
6. We need to give fraternities and sororities on campus diversity workshops.
7. We need more multicultural programming.
8. Students (of color) should stop funding (white) Greek system dances and events.
9. Minority students should recruit & mentor minority students, help with applications, FAFSA.
10. We need stronger ties to the community particularly the Buddhist temple and the Japanese-American ---- League.
11. EOP shouldn’t be cut.
12. We need diverse faculty role models.
13. Outreach need to not just be out of the Outreach office. Administrators need to check out what Outreach is doing.
14. Students of color can transfer to a more comfortable place.
15. Students of color can stay to purposefully prove that they can.
16. It feels good to get stuff off (our) chest.

Notes from Cathy Kroll:

Some of the points students made, with great passion and concern:

- The first comment came from a student who identified himself as an EOP student of immigrant parents. He acknowledged the importance of promoting diversity at SSU, but said that, in his opinion, bringing the best academically prepared students to SSU—of any race or ethnicity—should be the campus’s first priority. [The basic meritocracy argument.]
- The next comments critiqued the social climate at SSU: We’re not aware of one another on campus.
- What are [white] students going to do when they get out into the world and enter a very diverse workplace? They are going to be really unprepared to work with others who are not like them.
- All people and all experiences have intrinsic value and should be acknowledged and supported. Diversity is not a “problem,” although it is often treated as one.
- Teachers and the university administration should announce, support, and attend cultural events put on by the various student groups.
- Campus needs to “walk the talk” on diversity, not just put up a few banners for Black History Month.
- Students value the comfort zones provided by BSU, MeCHA, and all students on campus are invited to join them.
- Professors aren’t trained to work with students from a wide variety of communities and regularly display their ignorance. Comments from a professor about lynching. A student recalls another professor saying: “I really value the time I spent living in San Francisco because I learned to speak to people as equals.” [This suggests the hidden elitism that permeates academia: social, class, and intellectual hierarchies that devalue student contributions and the contributions of those with less education in general.]
- One student pointed out that white, suburban students “aren’t cultured”: they come from insulated, provincial backgrounds and can’t deal with difference. “We aren’t cultured about other people.”
- One student noted that there are only 180 Black students at SSU, out of a population of 8500; she feels strongly that no one (apart from her friends) has acknowledged her being
at SSU. The ignorant and intrusive comments from white roommates make Black students feel unwelcome and put on the spot.

- Another student stated that the recent diversity workshops for faculty and staff have been unsuccessful because they've been too abstract, too general, too “academic.” She referenced the “categories of diversity” that are often listed at such workshops.

- There was a call for ways to help students learn to speak comfortably about race.

- More respect for everyone is needed, as individuals, not as members of a particular race or community.

My thoughts: as I listened to students’ words, I heard a great deal of pain and frustration about the social climate at SSU. What I heard repeatedly is that communities on campus by and large do not interact well with one another. Students of color experience racism, rudeness, and simple ignorance on a daily basis.

What I also sense is an unacknowledged subtext about the hegemony of white culture in this country. Within that hegemony (institutions of power including education, financial services, media, and business in general) lie dehumanizing hierarchies that rank, order, and privilege “white,” mainstream culture and a very narrow set of norms. Within this hegemonic culture simmers elitism, oppressive hierarchies, rampant materialism that debilitates human confidence, dignity, and simple comfort. I sense that there is a significant amount of unacknowledged pain within the dominant culture that it is taboo to express. Yes, there is simple ignorance about the histories of communities outside one’s own (and this ignorance often gets expressed rudely and awkwardly at others), but there is also a high level of displacement of frustration that ends up as scapegoating directed at others who are perceived to be “lower” on that very hierarchy. These are wrenching psychological realities to deal with, but they must be dealt with, in my view. Adorno et al. already wrote about them in 1950 in The Authoritarian Personality as a way of trying to understand the Holocaust. I think we need to recover that kind of wisdom and work ceaselessly to raise consciousness in our classrooms and on the campus.