

Minutes of the University Diversity Committee October 10, 2003

Present: Kris Bartanen, Devon Biggerstaff, Jane Brazell, Julie Christoph, Marie DeBenedictis, Rosa Beth Gibson, David Macey (chair), Blaire Notrica, Margi Nowak, David Scott, David Sousa, Carrie Washburn.
Guests: Jessica Humann, Leiana Jagolino, Yoshiko Matsui, Natasha Quraishi.

David Macey called the meeting to order at 3:30 p.m. at the Student Diversity Center.

The minutes of September 11 were approved with corrections to spellings of names and a clarification of the content of Jane Brazell's suggestion regarding the Faculty Senate's Charge #3 for the University Diversity Committee.

Macey called for reports on committee members' work over the past two weeks and noted that all present, including visitors, were welcome to speak.

Margi Nowak reported that she had spoken with Michael Pavel, who sends his greetings to the Committee. Pavel, who is currently an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at WSU, is working to develop meaningful relationships with community colleges and local K-12 schools serving American Indian and Alaskan Native students and communities. Nowak is interested in exploring with Pavel ways of being more supportive of students from underserved populations, such as Native American communities, who might consider attending UPS. Nowak will continue the conversation with Pavel and is hopeful that he will be able to visit campus in the near future. Macey and others expressed enthusiastic support for our continued contact with Pavel.

Macey reported on the conversation that took place on Thursday, October 9, regarding stereotypes, racial and ethnic diversity, and our campus community. The conversation arose after concerns about the recent posting of blackface posters on campus. The conversation was attended by a wide representation of students, staff, and faculty, and addressed practical ways to address sensitive issues on a campus-wide basis, addressing the question of how we can act without hurting others. Macey asked for additional comments from others who had attended.

Blaire Notrica agreed that the conversation on the 9th was a productive meeting and noted that it was good to see people (twenty-nine in all) from different backgrounds there. He believes the conversation opened up an honest dialogue and noted that one productive result of the conversation was that the group has requested an appointment to speak with President Thomas about the blackface incident and how the campus community can work together to prevent future occurrences of such incidents.

Macey reported that Thomas's secretary, Joanne Chester, has suggested potential times to meet. Macey encouraged others to help choose a date and join in the conversation. He noted that the group will be meeting on an ongoing basis and that everyone is encouraged to participate and to spread the word to others.

Members of the Diversity Committee signaled appreciation to Macey for convening the conversation. Julie Christoph noted that one of the important elements that came out of the meeting was an awareness that it is not enough for us to mean well, but that we need to be educated about ways that we can avoid acting and speaking in unintentionally hurtful ways. Natasha Quraishi and Notrica expressed their support for the conversations' move toward action to improve awareness and appreciation of diversity on campus, rather than talk alone.

David Sousa asked what concrete suggestions had come out of the conversation. Macey reported that proposed actions included a conversation with Thomas, curricular changes to both Prelude and the First-Year Seminars in Writing and Rhetoric that would address issues related to diversity, and discussion of topics related to diversity at the New Faculty orientation and the Fall Faculty Conversation.

Marie DeBenedictus asked whether participants in the conversation had been the usual people involved in diversity-related conversations on campus, or if new participants had been there as well. Notrica responded that many of the usual people were there but that new people had come as well, including the students who had posted the flier.

Brazell asked whether students were generally aware of the chain of command, or where to go for help when incidents like this one occurred. She suggested that there could be posters and cards around campus to let students know what to do when an incident occurs in which individuals and groups on campus are subjected to slurs of various kinds.

Nowak wondered whether the central issue is bias or if it is resistance to explanation—a problem that is best exemplified by claims that groups and individuals are “overreacting” when they claim that instances of bias and stereotyping have occurred. Nowak suggested that this problem of resistance is more difficult to overcome than prejudice. In response, Brazell noted that she’d heard a commentator on the Tavis Smiley show on NPR who argued that the reason why there are more claims of racism being made now, as opposed to fifteen years ago is that people now have more freedom to respond to racism; the problem is not that people now are overreacting but that we as a nation are not accustomed to hearing about it.

Biggerstaff asked whether the Diversity Committee should be active in incorporating a diversity aspect to Prelude and noted that there is already a group on campus talking about the first-year orientation program and changes for next year.

Carrie Washburn suggested that the Diversity Statement might provide an opportunity for fora to discuss issues related to diversity. Rather than having a standard presentation to circulate around the dorms, as we’d suggested at the last meeting, we might instead use the Diversity Statement to generate conversations. Kris Bartanen noted that Debbie Chee, Eric Orlin, Terry Cooney, and she had attended a conference at Mt. Holyoke, where they learned about the study circle model of successive discussions, which might be a good way to facilitate the kind of discussion Washburn suggested. Another possible model is an intergroup dialogue model coming out of the University of Michigan. Mt. Holyoke College has used the model in residence halls on topics of racial, gender, and sexual orientation diversity.

Brazell commented on the difficulty of getting people on campus to talk about diversity as an entire concept, rather than as a series of issues belonging to groups that represent separate aspects of the diversity on our campus. She questioned how we can address issues like blackface while we still address other less public but concurrent diversity-related issues. How, for example, can we address the widespread use on campus of the phrase “that’s gay” to denote anything that is undesirable. She noted that it is difficult to ensure everyone’s accessibility to and right to speak on campus and that, speaking metaphorically, we tend to have many solo performances but not a lot of complete orchestral performances.

David Scott commented that one aspect that hinders discussions of diversity is that characteristics of groups are difficult to separate from broad stereotypes. He notes that it is possible to dislike something without disliking the entire group of people who do that thing; for example, it is possible to dislike rap music aesthetically without disliking all people who perform or like rap music, but that fine distinction is often lost in discussions about diversity.

Macey commented that, while it is not desirable for separate groups on campus to be pitted against each other, we cannot expect all conversations to include all aspects of diversity at once. Yoshiko Matsui noted that even when people embody many aspects of diversity, they may be at different levels of comfortability in talking about different aspects of themselves. She noted that the plans for the Diversity Theme Year are, to use Brazell’s symphony metaphor, like a symphony of notes. B.D. Wong is a note, “The Road to Brown” is a note, and so forth, although it is not a given that all people on campus will hear all the “notes.”

Scott noted that social pressure and social norms prevent people from taking on issues related to diversity. Matsui concurred and suggested that it is within the social norm for peers (students, staff, and

faculty) to talk to and coach their own peers on how to be more respectful of diversity. Washburn and Brazell concurred.

Macey asked how we might model that kind of coaching so that it seems like a possible and normal behavior. Brazell suggested that the National Coalition Building Institute approach (NCBI) might be appropriate, although the majority of people on campus who have been trained in this approach are no longer at UPS. She asked whether it would be possible to rebuild that model here on campus. Matsui and Bartanen agreed that this approach can work well but that responses to it have sometimes been polarized.

Macey suggested that, given that several on the Committee will be at conferences on October 24, it might be appropriate to meet again on the 17th and then again on November 7. This scheduling change was approved.

The meeting adjourned at 4:30.

Respectfully submitted,
Julie Christoph