

Committee on Diversity  
Minutes of Feb. 28, 2011

Committee Members Present: Kim Bobby, Lynnette Claire, Pepa Lago-Grana, Mark Martin, Susan Owen, Amy Ryken

The meeting was called to order at 12:02.

Announcements: None

Minutes of Feb. 14, 2010:

Pepa asked that the word “foreign” be deleted from item #2 so that the sentence reads: “Pepa commented on the lack of language as a part of the question posed to students for the project.” A short discussion ensued about the possibility of adding language as one of the categories presented to students in the Valuing Difference Project.

The minutes of Feb. 14, 2010 were approved as amended.

Committee Business:

Update from Amy on the Student Cohort Initiative. Claire asked for clarification on the student population of the Cohort project.

Further discussion: Faculty Narratives about unanticipated moments in the classroom. The committee focused specifically on Narrative #6 (attached). The discussion was guided by three questions: How might you respond to this situation? What questions does the scenario raise for you? How might your response change if the situation were related to another type of difference?

It was suggested that members of the committee seek out additional Faculty Narratives about unanticipated moments in the classroom. All narratives collected are to be forwarded to Kim, by the end of March 2011.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:54.

Respectfully submitted,  
Susan Owen

## Faculty Narratives: Classroom Moments of Unanticipated Student Spotighting

### Narrative 6

In a 300-level seminar, I taught one of the few visibly Muslim students I have met on our campus. She dressed in Western clothes, but was always covered from neck to wrists to ankles, and wore the hijab.

The course required that students present their semester's research during the closing weeks of class. Although I had seen outlines and early drafts of the research papers, I was caught off guard by one student. His outline and draft had been particularly rough, but he assured me he was working hard on them. He began his presentation by announcing that the title of his talk was "The Arab World Doesn't Want Peace, Never Has, and Never Will." I was floored. I had known this student held strong pro-Israeli views, but nothing in his classroom demeanor had led me to expect this show of intolerance. He proceeded to make a very one-sided argument, based on highly partisan sources, that Arab countries engage in bad faith international relations. He cited sources for his claims, but they were not works with which I was familiar (possibly because I am not a Middle East specialist).

The Muslim student, who was not an Arab, stared into her lap during the entire presentation. Her body language told everyone that she was upset. I was deeply torn about how to respond in this moment. As a political scientist, I always try to keep my own political views hidden from my students; and I feared that any intervention on my part would be seen as partisan rather than pedagogical. On the other hand, I wanted to do something to keep the Muslim student from being hurt. I felt paralyzed. To complicate matters further, the presentation format dictated that students take questions only after their presentations.

Most of the students in the class recognized the bias in the presentation. After the presentation, they peppered the presenter with questions about his work. However, the students were debating the politics of the situation, rather than the quality of the research. Their responses could easily be attributed by the presenter to partisan differences, rather than objections to the tone and subjectivity of his presentation. I had not made any of the other presenters justify their choice of sources, and was not sure how to do so without seeming to attack the presenter. I was torn between wanting to call the student out and fearing that I would look like a partisan bully. Ultimately, I said very little to the presenter, except to challenge his characterization of the New York Times as anti-Israeli and to question whether his claims were overstated.

After the class, I e-mailed the Muslim student, said I knew the class must have been difficult for her, and thanked her for her tolerance. She replied that she had been hurt and angry, but wasn't going to show that in class.

Even at the time, I knew that I had missed a chance to intervene meaningfully in these events. I wanted the presenter to see that my objections were more than just partisan preferences, and

could not think on my feet of a way to convey that. Whenever I recall this incident, I wish I had handled it differently.

By the way – I did attempt to address the presenter’s bias in my written comments. Subsequently, this attempt to remain non-partisan and ask for rigorous vetting of sources was criticized by another student. He argued at length in person, in writing, and to John Finney about the “pro-Palestinian” bias in my grading and in my unwillingness to protect the presenter from criticism by the class.