Fall 2015 Faculty Listening Tour

In late Fall semester small groups of faculty visited six different Cultural Centers where they listened to students talk openly about their experiences around inclusion at the UA. The following is a summary of what we heard in those sessions. It is relatively unvarnished, but specific names have been taken out. It begins with common themes expressed across many of the cultural centers, and follows with specifics linked to individual centers.

There are two kinds of limits to this report. First, there are limits to what one can conclude, with certainty, based on anecdotes. General trends yes, details perhaps not. Second, there are limits on what we, as faculty, can do. There is much we do not control. But, there is a lot we can do – a good deal more than many of us suspect.

This report is circulated as a conversation starter, with the goal of leading to specific proposals and actions by and with faculty participation. It is, to be clear, a summary of what we heard, relatively unfiltered. Expressed below are the experiences of the students we listened to. This document gives some voice to their experiences.

CONCERNS EXPRESSED IN MULTIPLE MEETINGS

♦ Some faculty/graduate students/staff engage in gross generalizations, stereotyping, racial bias and unconscious/conscious comments that perpetuate the “othering” of individuals and/or groups, revealing a severe lack of understanding of diversity within and across individuals and groups.

♦ There is a lack of acknowledgement of the inherent power imbalance between faculty and students and a disregard for its effect on students in the classroom, during office hours, during advising, etc.

♦ Students experience overt and implicit racism in some interactions with peers, with faculty and with staff.

♦ There is a need for a more diverse faculty at the UA or at least faculty who are aware and up on cultural diversity.

♦ There is wide-spread concern about the lack of diversity among staff – most especially among advisors (many of whom advised students of color against going into more difficult disciplines such as STEM) and also among mental health professionals (CAPS and Campus Health). Many advisors/counselors/student service providers are outside of, and ignorant of, cultural norms. Students felt they were diverted away from challenging majors based on assessment of ‘fit’, and then blamed for being ‘too sensitive’ if they complained.
Cultural centers are understaffed, underfunded and under-resourced; but they keep students in school – they are crucially important. There is a severe lack of resources and funding for the cultural centers. Most of the center spaces are small and inadequate for the students the centers serve. Most centers have one full time director and 1-2 half-time students working in the center. The staff live with a continual tension between meeting the needs of students and educating faculty/staff/students about what it takes to have an inclusive and supportive campus climate. Cuts in resources to cultural centers communicates a lack of caring from the University for the relevant student constituents.

Food insecurity, hunger and homelessness are problems; lack of financial aid for out-of-state students, lack of dedicated funding addressing the needs of students is prevalent across campus; lack of sufficient financial aid and lack of follow-through after recruitment (DACA, out-of-state students) is a significant problem.

Peers can range from ignorant to malicious to violent. Instructors should take responsibility for creating an inclusive and safe classroom for all students. They should set the tone, make explicit the policies on syllabi, set guidelines for classroom dialogue, and monitor group work. It cannot be the sole or even major responsibility of students to educate the faculty in matters of diversity and cultural competency.

Orientations for in-coming students and for transfer students should include information on the cultural centers and resources available to students on campus.
Some Things Heard at Individual Cultural Centers

Native American Students Association

♦ Lack of understanding of the diversity of tribal cultures: there are over 500 tribes and Native Americans are not all the same.
♦ Programmatic concerns (i.e. the Sloan Fellowship Program; freshman courses specially for Native Americans that had to be cut for budgetary reasons; retention issues; lack of Native American faculty).
♦ An issue that is very pertinent within the Native community is one of invisibility. That is, when diversity issues at the UA emerge, they tend to focus on other racial/ethnic minorities and not Native students.

LGBTQ+

♦ LGBTQ students experience two main problems on campus: Harassment by other students in and outside of class, and classroom instructors that explicitly or implicitly facilitate discrimination against LGBTQ students (e.g., insensitive discussion topics), or ignore acts of discrimination by other students when they happen. These students must work much harder than other students to learn.
♦ Classroom instructors (and professors, in general) can adopt some really simple changes to improve the climate for LGBTQ students, e.g., adopt more inclusive pronouns in the syllabus and classroom dialogue.
♦ Instructors can make stronger statements in syllabi and in class about the importance of appreciating all forms of diversity, including sexual identity/orientation.
♦ The LGBTQ students made some suggestions for campus-wide changes that might increase their feeling of inclusion and also reduce the norms for expressing prejudice:
  • Create a system for students to anonymously let instructors know when they crossed the line in the classroom or lab.
  • Create social norm marketing and social media marketing campaigns to promote appreciation for diversity and inclusion.
  • Faculty need to pay close attention to group work. How groups are constructed, how groups are monitored and how faculty, TAs, preceptors and students are prepared for open and constructive group work that does not allow for intolerance and/or bullying.
Women’s Resource Center

- Sexual assault prevention rather than reaction is needed.
- Reporting to UAPD is often not done because the police are not trusted – their reaction too often is one of “slut-shaming” - e.g., what were you wearing, etc. UAPD needs training on responding to sexual assault/domestic violence calls.
- Syllabi warnings are often not enough – especially when very graphic material is being presented. Faculty should actively raise issues around inclusion and tolerance at the beginning of the semester, to create an environment within which problematic behavior is minimized and quickly reported when it does happen because the faculty member has made it clear at the outset that this is what should be done. Mandatory Warnings Policy before class viewings and assignments of controversial material.
- More attention needs to be paid to the inadvertent ways in which faculty perpetuate rigid gendering notions – e.g., by binary pronoun use.
- Students need a workshop on what “consent” is and is not in sexual encounters provided in a small group format to ensure it sinks in.

APASA

- Significant cultural insensitivity issues – there are many Asian cultures, each quite unique – and they differ enormously from one another. Yet all Asians are often treated alike and the diversity of Asian culture is ignored.
- It would be helpful to have disaggregated data so that different Asian groups are not all lumped together.
- Student-student interactions can also be a source of significant problems.
- Unhealthy generalizations abound – in particular around Muslims.
- Counseling services seem devoid of diverse clinicians – students often cannot connect with clinicians from another, quite different, culture.
- The same problems arise with advising – frequently students cannot connect with their advisors because of cultural differences.
- The UA needs more Asian faculty, and an Asian American Studies Program.
- APASA Center needs more space and more staff. The center runs on 1 FTE plus 2 part time GRAs. This is insufficient.
- Follow-up with the DOS Office to see if they published something like 30% of APASA students cheat. If so, why was it reported in this way? Without context, this can send the wrong message to faculty in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, justify instructor profiling, cause preferential monitoring, etc.).
- Work to dispel the ‘model minority myth’, as it is also damaging.
Guerrero

- Need increased focus on social justice issues.
- Lack of culturally appropriate professional support for students in trouble.
- Safety issues for women – sexual assault problems, especially in Greek life.
- A major concern about the perpetual declines in funding for the cultural centers (broadly) and CHSA (specifically). Guerrero Center staff is too small. Students also spoke of the importance of CHSA as a place of belonging, and one even said she would have dropped out if not for CHSA.
- DACA students and the lack of financial aid these students receive.
- Many of the students felt their advisors had low academic expectations of them and this led to advice to leave STEM.
- The lack of diversity in counseling and psychological services and systematic lack of professional support for students in emotional duress, crisis. Students are referred to medication immediately instead of being properly diagnosed. (i.e., CAPS). Plus the lack of the $25 to even pay for an appointment there.
- Insensitivity of faculty joking about issues around immigration and targeting students of color as “examples” to educate white students.
- ASUA including constant misspellings of Spanish names and surnames, very careless approach.
- Illegal Pete restaurant issue (restaurant on Main Gate) – public harassment.
- Yik Yak social media tool – Comments about people protesting Illegal Pete’s – seen as hateful speech online by other non-Latino students.
- Need for sexual assault prevention programs – OASIS – feeling unsafe at night on campus, Greek life especially. Process of accused assailants or harassers is not deeply investigated.
- Campus demographics do not reflect the local demographics. Who is getting hired – a lot of white people, faculty and staff.
- University seen as looking for international students but little attention paid to domestic students of color.
- Students want faculty to be more careful about responsibly and fairly presenting other views/many views; and to be more up-front about the fact that their own bias isn’t the only possible way to see things.
- There should be required intergroup dialog, community service or similar to educate all students about issues.
BSU / AASA

♦ The Black Student Union (BSU) prepared a list of demands and a MOU they presented to President Hart for her signature.
♦ Being black at the UA means being: oppressed, underrepresented, subject to micro-aggressions, hidden in a sea of white, racially profiled in both words and actions.
♦ There is a lack of black faculty and role models; lack of diversity in advising.
♦ Disciplines/degree areas are perceived as “white” only. Lack of encouragement for the aspirations of black students.
♦ There is a lack of support for multicultural fraternities and sororities.
♦ On the other hand, some units have good programs, but these are often not communicated well.
♦ When students require extra support it is rarely available – more resources are desperately needed to help deal with student emergencies around funding.
♦ Incoming students need much better information upon arrival and need to know how they can react to difficult situations and to whom they can bring concerns.
♦ BSU/AASA is a safe space on campus. Students say if it was not for AASA and BSU they would have left UA already.
♦ The AASA is extremely important to black students, and resource limitations are quite serious, both in terms of space and staff. Moving the IT group out of MLK would be a step in the right direction.
♦ Residence Halls and Staff are not prepared. No steps, actions taken to help or to address racial slurs posted on bathroom stalls or called out to black students except for saying “you can move out to another dorm next year.”
♦ Black students are not given info specific to them during orientation about where to get help, mentoring, advising, AASA, etc.