

COMMITTEE ON INTERCULTURAL AND GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING ANNUAL REPORT 2009-2010

Committee Membership 2009-2010:

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Barbara Krause, Executive Director, Office of the President
Mariel Martin, Director, Office of Student Diversity Programs
Peter McCarthy, Lecturer, Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work
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Introduction

In an effort to address the issue of substantive service demands for committee members, CIGU met nine times (for a minimum of 80 minutes per meeting) during the 2009-2010 academic year, including

APPENDIX:

EXIT INTERVIEWS WITH GRADUATING STUDENTS OF COLOR
Intercultural Center, Skidmore College
May 14, 2010

INTRODUCTION

On May 14, 2010 members of CIGU conducted exit interviews with ten self-identified graduating students of color, with seven students participating in the first 90-minute session and three students participating in the second 90-

belong. Something was missing.” Another student asked, “How do you receive comments such as, ‘How could you be Spanish if you’re White?’ Or a comment like, ‘Your parents are going to cut my grass...’ Comments like these make students of color feel uncomfortable.” One student recalled one such interaction in one of the residence halls during her first month at Skidmore. “I still remember a drinking experience where a former Skidmore student mocked a so-called ‘Black kid laugh’ and would not apologize after I approached him about it.” These seniors insisted that such experiences were not limited to student-to-student interactions. One student recalled a time when someone from the Skidmore staff commented on how her hair was like “sporting a bird nest kind of thing.’ I was insulted, but did not let it bother me.”

CLASSROOM AND CURRICULUM

Several students remarked at length about their experiences in Scribner Seminars or in gateway courses at the departmental level. “I very much enjoyed the summer reading and my Scribner Seminar,” a student recalled. However, she also remembered one class when the non-OP students’ “mouths were wide open” as she answered a question from the professor. “It was as if to say, ‘Wow, how could I have known that?’” This student asserted that this early encounter represented a “rude awakening” in terms of what she could expect over the course of the next four years in the classroom. Another senior remarked in some detail about the FYE reading selection, *Life on the Color Line* by Gregory Howard Williams, noting that several White students did not “appreciate” or enjoy either the book or his FYE lecture. According to this student, a White classmate said, “I did not come here to talk about race. I came here for a good GPA and to play sports.” One student noted that the issue of discussing race explicitly surfaced again during a peer-mentoring experience with 15 White students in conjunction with a Scribner Seminar. When the student moderated a discussion of Spike Lee’s documentary *When the Levees Broke*, some students commented that “Lee is a racist.” Another first-year student asked, “When Spike Lee refers to ‘we’ – who is ‘we’?”

Another senior recalled an MB107 Wal-Mart case discussion. “One-half or more of my classmates will be CEO’s of their families’ businesses. With that in mind, this particular conversation bothered me. The discussion was about why people would even need to shop at Wal-Mart, which is available for ‘low-class folks.’ I felt scared and uncomfortable but I had to speak up: ‘I like Wal-Mart; I don’t have a choice!’ The Professor approached me afterwards and congratulated me for speaking up because she said I brought an awareness of race and class to the discussion.”

Nearly half of those interviewed spoke explicitly of the need to reassess the CD/NW general education requirement. One student suggested that “we could use a “diversity seminar,” as well as offer more trans-gender talks. He asserted that doing so “would help decrease bias incidents” on campus. “How White kids react will determine a good experience at Skidmore,” one student contended. It was for this reason that the student suggested that every student

enroll in a “‘race’ class early on.” Contending that “we give of a false view of ‘diversity’ at Skidmore,” another student suggested that the College provide a mentorship opportunity for each student, as well as have a “‘fundamentals-type’ course on diversity.” Another graduating senior discussed the CD/NW requirement specifically. “I hate that so many students wait until senior year to take a Non-Western course. Why not earlier on?” she asked. A fellow senior mentioned to this student that if she had taken a particular CD/NW course earlier on, she would certainly have taken more. “Waiting until senior year makes it feel like it’s unimportant.”

A few of the graduating seniors remarked that their own search for a more diverse environment complicated their experiences with a given major or minor. One senior noted that her major field classes “often made me feel disconnected, and I did not feel engaged.” This student remarked that there are few places outside of American Studies where faculty diversity is reflected in tangible ways. “This was a hindrance for me, because I felt more connected to the American Studies faculty than those in my major.”

Without question, though, the pilot Intergroup Relations (IGR) program was the curricular issue that generated the most discussion during the exit interviews. At least seven of the ten students had participated in IGR in some way: some had enrolled in Race and Power or Racial Identity: Theory and Praxis; others had been facilitators of or participants in one of the one-credit dialogues; a few participated in IGR forums. With one exception, students had positive overall assessments of the program, even if they had concerns with specific aspects of it. Most concurred with the view offered by one senior who “really enjoyed the experience.” Two students remarked, however, that they did not think that Skidmore students were as open and honest in the dialogues as they could have been. One senior said, “I felt that you could not really share your ideas/thoughts completely.” Although very positive about IGR, another student was concerned that Skidmore students are “a bit too laid back” to make the most of the dialogues. This student suggested that this reflected a larger absence of social engagement at Skidmore. “I saw how Howard and Georgetown students are active; Skidmore students are not nearly as politically active.”

Another student was not convinced that IGR fulfills students’ expectations. While in class, this student felt a sense of dissatisfaction. “The IGR program has the potential, but it should be reevaluated; it won’t work in the same way at Skidmore that it has worked at the University of Michigan.” A third student maintained that the key issue was institutional buy-in from faculty and administrators. “IGR has to get the support it needs.” Other students sounded a familiar refrain regarding the larger student body. “It seems as if the same group of folks is repeating the same old story over and over again.”

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Irrespective of individual commitments to OSDP groups, several of the graduating seniors spoke of a sense of fatigue when serving as advocates on behalf of inclusion. “I honestly don’t give a shit,” one senior remarked. “Students need to learn, and our education here is a tool—not to be full-time activists.” Another senior echoed those sentiments, noting that educating the campus community about diversity has “become a job for minority kids while at Skidmore.” Several students remained positive about the presence of OSDP clubs. “There is more support available now for OSDP and diversity clubs, which is good,” one senior remarked. “I also hope that IGR continues to grow. Lastly, I think Rochelle Calhoun has been really helpful, especially with regards to the work of the Bias Response Group.” Another senior referenced activism on campus three years ago around Goal Two. “It feels like only the seniors know about the list of eleven demands that Phred Braunstein gave to Mariel [Martin] so that things could be followed-up on and get implemented. Being open to dialogue is important, and I think there is a more supportive atmosphere at Skidmore—more folks are willing to speak up, listen to concerns from the Bias Response Group.”

STUDY ABROAD

One senior remarked about a study abroad experience in Italy that was complicated by the perception that “I looked like an immigrant and felt ethnically ambiguous” while away. Ironically, that study abroad experience reminded the student of a summer work experience back in the U.S. in which a customer continually remarked, “how well you speak the English language,” steadily inquiring of her, “Where do you come from?” Another senior recalled her semester studying in Spain. Spanish was not the student’s native language; nevertheless, it was a profound experience, in part because of similar definitional ambiguities. This student noted that she “blended in well,” and felt that she had an advantage because “I looked like some of the people there.”

LGBTQ CONCERNS

One graduating senior spoke at some length about life at Skidmore for LGBTQ students of color. This student spoke of Skidmore as being a safe space for the most part, but also noted being the target of homophobic epithets on campus. It was downtown, however, where this senior had been threatened both racially and especially because this student is openly LGBTQ. “I’ve been called a ‘faggot’ both at Skidmore and downtown. But it was downtown that I experienced physical violence. I was walking down Broadway with my partner and someone kept making homophobic remarks. When I told this guy’s friends to keep in line, they just laughed, and he threw snowballs at me. Next thing I know we’re in a fistfight. It’s really painful, but I have to stand up for myself.”

FACULTY/STAFF DIVERSITY

The discussion of faculty and staff diversity figured prominently in both exit interview sessions. One senior remarked, "I would love to see more openly gay faculty, as well as persons of color and those who have children, especially if they are willing to offer their research and personal perspectives on life to students." Several of these graduating seniors remarked that certain White faculty members have played an important role in their intellectual development. "Professor Pat Ferraioli is a great role model for me. Skidmore offers very few classes that offer a sense of different aspects of life," one student observed, noting that her "courses help students learn to relate."

Most of the seniors focused their attention on the relative absence of faculty and staff of color. One student stated the issue this way: "We need more faculty of color! Hiring more diverse faculty helps students because