Supporting the Work of the Diversity Task Force: A Framework

Respectfully submitted by Cecil E. Canton, member

The numerous task force and committee reports and surveys on the book shelves in President Nelson’s (and his predecessor’s) office attest to the many attempts over the years to address the troubling lack of diversity among the faculty, staff and administration at CSUS and the “chilly” campus climate reported by those passing through this “destination” campus. Those documents are the final resting place of recommendations, suggestions and opinions that have been gathered and collected, too often without public notice, comment or implementation!

If *this* Diversity Task Force is to lead the university’s efforts to address long standing issues such as creating (and sustaining) a supportive environment/climate that more closely mirrors the changing demographics of the state, closing the achievement gap, and providing for meaningful educational equity, we must be willing to examine the “lived” experiences and realities of those community members who have been the most marginalized in our university and our state and engage in courageous conversations about what we find. In order to have those conversations, we have to do what Roderick has suggested: we must learn how to talk *honestly* with one another.[[1]](#footnote-1) We can begin to accomplish that by engaging in the “*Journey into Change”* unconscious bias workshop sponsored by the Council for Affirmative Action.[[2]](#footnote-2) In short, if we are to find success where past efforts have failed, we must be willing to challenge the *status quo,* and do things differently. Absent that, our task force report’s recommendations, suggestions and advice will be consigned to its own plot in the graveyard.

As the recent survey and inventory of reports, programs, initiatives, and other efforts we received at the inaugural Diversity Task Force meeting have made clear; there have been myriad attempts to address the issue of “diversity” on many levels over the years. However, prior to any effort to evaluate our diversity efforts, we must have a common definition of what we believe diversity to be. What is “diversity” and why has it been such an elusive target at Sacramento State?

The on-line Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “diversity” as “*the condition of having or being composed of differing elements,(* [*variety*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/variety)*); the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization <programs intended to promote diversity in schools>;* *an instance of being composed of differing elements or qualities* ***:****an instance of being* [*diverse*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) *<a diversity of opinion>”.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

In my opinion, the term “diversity” has become a substitute for what used to be called “affirmative action.” “Affirmative action” as a term fell into disfavor because it exposed underlying resentments and racial fracture lines regarding our nation’s responsibility to “level the playing field” for those long marginalized within our society. “Diversity” is a softer, mutable and more acceptable term, one that doesn’t require an explanation for the failure to live up to our expressed beliefs about equality.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, it masks what Mills calls the “racial contract:”[[5]](#footnote-5) the systems and structures of power that keep institutional racism in place and continue to deny meaningful change in the academy and the country.

As Kendall points out “focusing solely on “diversity” without addressing oppression, not speaking specifically to the experience of people of color in predominantly white organizations, or not talking openly about racism in the organization”[[6]](#footnote-6) is a recipe for continued failure.

Yet, we know that failure, or the lack of success, can come from many other causes. Chief among them is the failure to align our efforts with the mission of the university or to appropriately evaluate their effectiveness. As a task force, we need to review the CSUS Mission statement, identify its aspiration for “diversity and inclusion,” and then use it to animate our own work.

In order to strategically assess the viability and impact of any “diversity” efforts, we must first gauge their fidelity to two key components: (a) mission and goals and (b) measures of success. In its report *A Policy and Legal “Syllabus” for Diversity Programs at Colleges and Universities*, the Access and Diversity Collaborative [[7]](#footnote-7) has identified these elements as essential to any framework examining an institution’s commitment to and success with diversity. Regarding the mission and goals component, it states:

An institution…. should clearly articulate its particular, broad-based diversity goals, with a direct connection to its mission and the long-recognized benefits of diversity that include improved teaching and learning, preparation for the 21st century workforce, and enhanced preparation for civic participation. [[8]](#footnote-8)

The Collaborative also gives us guidance on key questions regarding mission and goals that should be addressed by our task force: What are the educational interests that CSUS (and its various departments, schools and colleges) seek to achieve through its diversity goals? Are those goals directly related to the institution’s mission? Are they clearly communicated? Do institutional leaders, administrators, faculty, and other stakeholders have the right information and understanding of the institution’s mission and diversity goals for communicating and building support, both internally and with the public?[[9]](#footnote-9)I would add that we also need to determine whether or not *and* how these efforts connect to one another.

With respect to measures of success, the Collaborative insists that:

*Establishing key measures by which to gauge success over time is a critical step in evaluating progress and informing policy and practice decisions****.*** *As with most institutional policy issues, an array of qualitative and quantitative measures likely should inform judgments about success – all rooted in an institution’s unique mission and context.[[10]](#footnote-10)*

It goes on further to identify at least three dimensions of diversity that should inform what success looks like in an institution:

*1. Compositional diversity (which may include a “critical mass” of underrepresented minority students);*

*2. Diversity-related curricular and extra-curricular programming (e.g., cultural awareness workshops, core diversity requirements in general education courses, ethnic studies courses, etc.); and*

*3. Diverse interactions, characterized by students’ exchanges with racially and ethnically diverse people as well as with diverse ideas, information, and experiences.[[11]](#footnote-11)*

However, I believe that there is a fourth dimension, not mentioned by the Collaborative, but which is critical to determining success:

***4. Compositional diversity of faculty, staff and administration (which may include a “critical mass” of racial and ethnic underrepresented people.***

Again, the Collaborative provides us with guidance on key questionsfor our task forceto ask:

What does success look like, both institution-wide and within specific schools and departments?

How will the institution and its units know when success has been achieved? What data and information should inform these decisions? How does the institution’s unique mission and context inform this analysis?[[12]](#footnote-12)

These questions and the answers they elicit are particularly important for the fourth dimension: the compositional diversity of faculty, staff and administration. Which colleges, schools, divisions, departments and units reflect the compositional diversity of faculty, staff and administration to which we aspire? Why? Which colleges, schools, divisions and units do not reflect the compositional diversity to which we aspire? Why not? How can we effect the change we seek? How can we model that change?

Lastly, how can we sustain it?

In August 2015, the Council for Affirmative Action submitted recommendations to President Nelson that included the creation and appointment of a campus Diversity Officer position. This position is modeled after a similar position at CSU, East Bay, which has proven to be effective in responding to the dearth of underrepresented faculty and staff within colleges, schools, departments and programs on that campus. Recruiting and hiring more racial and ethnic underrepresented faculty remains a critical test for our campus. Our task force should support this very concrete recommendation.

This is our challenge as a task force. Our recommendations must be bold, concrete, direct and action oriented, if we are to achieve our goal and meet the president’s charge.

Works Cited and Consulted:

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1. (Roderick, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Canton, A Journey Into Change, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Merriam-Webster, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Canton, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Mills, 1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Kendall, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Access and Diversity Collaborative is comprised of the College Board, the American Council on Education and EducationCounsel LLC. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Collaborative, May 2015), p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Collaborative, May 2015), p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Collaborative, May 2015), p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. (Collaborative, May 2015), p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Collaborative, May 2015), p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)