

**MSU College of Agriculture and Natural Resources
Office of Diversity and Pluralism
Structured Discussion Group**

**Diverse Faculty
Conducted 8.3.06**

**KEY FINDINGS
8/16/06**

I. Background and Purpose

The Office of Diversity and Pluralism (ODP) and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR) at Michigan State University (MSU) contracted the facilitation of seven structured conversations with multiple stakeholder groups to accomplish two key objectives:

1. Gather information about how the ODP can better serve the needs of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources.
2. Identify the needs within the various departments as they relate to the general topic of diversity.

When these initial sessions were complete, the ODP opted to conduct an eighth session with faculty of difference. The purpose of this group was to provide an additional opportunity for minority faculty to address questions of diversity as they relate to the ODP, CANR and MSU in general.

NOTE: Due to the very high level of interest and the depth of opinions on this topic among group members, the discussion questions were not presented in the particular sequence previously used. The researcher facilitated the group to probe and understand additional issues as highlighted below in the Key Findings section.

II. Sample and Methodology

The Office of Diversity and Pluralism invited eight people to attend this session. A total of seven participated, with one of the seven being female. The discussion lasted approximately 2.5 hours.

The session was facilitated by Lisa O'Connor, COO/Partner of Publicom, at a meeting room on campus. Per client request, the session was not audio taped to encourage candidness.

III. Key Findings

- Diversity among faculty, staff and students is an “unquestionably” important issue for this group. They are truly passionate about it.
- They also deem it particularly important in terms of being competitive in the industry.
- The faculty would like to see how the university/ODP defines diversity and pluralism and “what” about it they deem important. The question is, ‘to what extent do they (CANR/MSU) believe in diversity?’
 - Is it simply lip service that diversity is nice, but not truly necessary? If a candidate for a faculty position is diverse, will this improve his/her chance for getting hired? They believe it should be based on the fact that diversity in and of itself is extremely important.
 - Their point: If minority students see diverse faculty members, they will come. If potential faculty members see other diverse faculty members at CANR earn tenure, and higher positions, they will come knowing there is opportunity.
- The group cautioned that if the ODP/CANR is not serious about truly supporting diversity, that they drop it altogether. Giving diversity and pluralism just “lip service” will do more damage than if it’s not discussed at all.
- The majority of the group members believe MSU should reflect the population it serves (Michigan). They do not feel the students, faculty and staff truly reflect the diverse nature of this population.
- The participants do not understand how the university can be a land-grant institution devoted to helping people upgrade their socioeconomic status and not be more committed to true diversity.
 - The university as a whole was as/more responsive to the issue of diversity/pluralism 20-30 years ago than they are now.
- They believe that in the past, MSU has been a great example of a university that took diversity seriously. MSU had the first African American President and was well respected and sought after for advice on the issue.
 - They noted with dismay that the diversity council to the president no longer exists.
 - They also noted, however, that the current president has done much to advance women on campus and that a women’s council now exists.
- The group also discussed the university’s admissions criteria and do not believe it supports the effort to improve diversity.

- As members of a variety of diverse groups themselves, they believe it is a part of their leadership responsibility to support diversity among themselves and to promote a diverse-outlook among their students.
- Many of these faculty feel that an important and often time-consuming part of their jobs involve counseling diverse students (and even other members of the university/college community).
- While the faculty members are happy to help mentor and coach diverse students, they point out that their White counterparts are more free to teach, research and publish. Furthermore, there is no reward or incentive from the college for them to provide the support they do to diverse students.
- It was noted that whenever minority (particularly international) student applications come in, that the students are sometimes judged in an unfair manner (some countries do not have a 4.0 scale, but they are measured against a 4.0 grade expectation), or the students are refused because no faculty will step up to advise them.
 - The group suggested that there is a perception that international students will be difficult to advise. Some faculty members refuse to advise them, thus hindering the diverse students' chances of being accepted.
- Issues related to diversity and pluralism within CANR (within a particular discipline, department, or field of specialization) include:
 - CANR is known as an "ag college" (production agriculture specifically). Newer branches of the college (marketing, agri-business, natural resources, etc.) aren't as well known to prospective students, high school counselors, etc.
 - CANR has a great international program. Many faculty are teaching abroad where the clientele is very diverse. This has been happening for more than 40 years. MSU has educated many students from Africa in particular, but, none of them seem to be "qualified" enough to be recruited back to MSU to teach.
 - The labor-base is diminishing in agriculture and many other fields. For example, minority farmers are marginalized because of the way that the agricultural industry is moving to large corporations.
- In terms of best practices these faculty would like to see a clearly understood and less wieldy hiring procedure put in place.
 - Often times, as diverse faculty members, these folks are a part of search-committees for new hires. In many instances, it is understood that they serve as a "token" person of color on the committee, to "make the university look good" and that when it comes down to it, an already

established “core group” of the committee typically influences the decision.

- There is the perception among this group that the older faculty “rule the roost” and that the “power brokers” are not people of diversity. They are more likely to be White and conservative.
 - Over the past few years, minority candidates for faculty positions have made it to the final three or four prospects. But, they have seldom been chosen as “the” candidate.
 - Some participants feel salary disparities exist between White and diverse faculty.
- In terms of resources, this group would like to see a very systematic and top-down approach taken to the issue of diversity/pluralism. They suggested some of the following:
 - Lead by example. Strong leadership (not just “lip service”), promoting diversity from the president of the university, the dean of CANR and the new director of the ODP.
 - Work with guidance counselors of high schools (particularly in the 1890 schools) to make sure there is a clear understanding that CANR is looking for diverse students, and to educate them on what CANR has to offer students (in terms of diversity of programs).
 - Create more programs like the Ag. Tech. 2-year program that exists for rural (typically White) students. It could be more targeted, and not just to “White farm kids” but to minorities as well. Not just for the low-tech (ag-tech/production oriented) disciplines, but for more specialized as well.
 - Create incentives for recruitment/retention of diverse student/faculty/staff efforts.
 - Back the diversity/pluralism effort financially. One member of the group gave an example of a diverse faculty member candidate who was approved by all, but who ended up being wooed by another university due to the financial package offered him there, compared to the one offered by MSU.
 - Require that all faculty advise minority graduate students on a rotating basis. (Be sure to monitor to ensure this is not a negative experience for the student!)
 - Create mandates (in all disciplines) for recruiting and retention efforts to emphasize the true importance of diversity/pluralism, and to sustain the diverse population that is brought in.
 - Make those who defy the diversity/pluralism effort accountable to their actions.

- Reinststitute the minority council at the presidential level.
- Locate and hire a director for the ODP. Make him/her a tenured staff person. Fill the position and prove that the issue is being taken seriously.

In summary, this group believes that only strong leadership will be able to pave the way to true diversity. The leaders need to embrace diversity for what it will lead to, and set the stage and the metrics to make it happen.