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Understanding and Encouraging Student Diversity: Involving the Community

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Abstract

The Committee on Diversity in the College of Education of Columbus State University has been involved in several programs since 2004 to increase the diversity in the college, both with students and faculty/staff. This has been accomplished by involving the community in and around Columbus, Georgia. This article addresses the committee's work to adapt several strategies to develop a three-pronged approach: (1) acceptance of diversity within our ranks, (2) partnering with *One Columbus*, a community organization to promote diversity, racial harmony, and unity in Columbus, and (3) participation with *CHISPA*, a Hispanic organization intended to recruit and retain Hispanic students at CSU and to build community in the College of Education. Ideas for each of these are shared.

The Committee on Diversity in the College of Education at Columbus State University has been involved in several programs since 2004 to increase the diversity in the college, both with students and faculty/staff. This has been accomplished by involving the community in and around Columbus, Georgia.

According to a report done in *US News and World Report* (November 9, 2008), Columbus State University is ranked the 10th most diverse among 105 colleges and universities in the South. To identify colleges where students are most likely to encounter undergraduates from racial or ethnic groups that are different from their own, *US News and World Report* factored in the total proportion of minority students and the overall mix of groups. This report was taken from the 2006-2007 censuses.

Goals of the Committee on Diversity are based on a major study that was done in the College of Education in 2003 by Dr. Murray Bradfield. Results of that study (Bradfield, 2004) revealed that there were some diverse students who felt isolated and felt a lack of association. In addition, that finding was coupled with a need to increase the graduation and diversity rates for teacher education students. As the need for a diverse body of teachers increased, it became apparent that a program to provide support to these diverse students was also essential. Project ACE (Avenue for a Culture of Excellence) grew out of the Bradfield study. Since some diverse students described feelings of isolation and a lack of association, this program grew out of that need.

According to the ACT News (2007), "When the percentage of students going to

college increases, it is likely that some of them will be less academically prepared and will struggle, especially if they are racially and/or culturally diverse” (p.1). Another body of research that serves as a basis for the committee’s goals is from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2008). That study concludes that there is a significant, positive relationship between family and community involvement and student achievement. According to Meg Parker and the Australian National Schools Network (2005), a study was done in the U.S. and Europe to investigate models of community-school partnerships, with the idea of bringing those recommendations to their school in Australia. They investigated the frameworks and elements of successful school and community partnerships and developed a common language in order to discuss and collaboratively build human capacity within their community.

The idea of involving the community is utilized elsewhere. Established in 2006, The Office of University-Community Engagement at the University of California contributes to the Student Academic Preparation and Educational Partnerships’ mission to raise student achievement, close achievement gaps, and increase college-going rates among low income and disadvantaged students.

The University of California (2008) does this by supporting and promoting UC campus community collaborations dedicated to improving learning and achievement. The University’s long standing academic preparation programs and emerging K-20 partnership efforts are to provide services to students, teachers, parents and school administrators. However, the diversity and enrollment at UC is unlikely to significantly change unless the university joins with community-based organizations with the same enthusiasm and consistency with which it has joined with schools. In such

university-community collaborations, organizations are committed to planning and taking action to improve student achievement and close achievement gaps.

The Committee on Diversity in the College of Education has adapted several of these strategies to develop a three-pronged approach: (1) acceptance of diversity within our ranks, (2) partnering with *One Columbus*, a community organization to promote diversity, racial harmony, and unity in Columbus, and (3) participation with *CHISPA*, a Hispanic organization intended to recruit and retain Hispanic students at CSU and to building community in the College of Education.

A required course for all education majors is EDUC 2120 *Exploring Socio-Cultural Contexts on Diversity in Educational Settings*. In this course, students are exposed to the beliefs and family structures of a wide variety of ethnic and cultural groups that future teachers will face in their classrooms. It is very important that teachers relate well to students and their families in order to encourage and help to raise academic achievement of their students. According to a letter by Berkowitz in *The New York Times* (2008), the two greatest concerns of new teachers and the one area they feel least competent about are behavior management and being knowledgeable enough about the diversity of their students to relate adequately to those students and their families.

To reach that goal, Project ACE, a “brainchild” of the Committee on Diversity, was established. Through Project ACE, a mentoring program has begun, and a group of speakers has been recruited from the wider community to speak to the classes on diversity. Included in the list of speakers is Ken Crooks, Executive Director of *One Columbus*; Cheryl Reneé, Morning anchor for the WTVM morning show; Rabbi Max Roth, Rabbi of Shearith Israel Synagogue;

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Imam Farhad Alifarhani, Imam of the Islamic mosque; Father Schreck, a Catholic priest; and Doris Brown, ESOL Director for the Muscogee County School District. Other intercultural experiences have been encouraged through the curriculum and service requirements in EDUC 2120

One Columbus is a community organization to encourage diversity and unity in the city of Columbus. It has been a partner with CSU in efforts to increase diversity and instill a sense of harmony among the various cultural and ethnic groups in the community. *One Columbus*, in collaboration with WTVM, sponsored a series of highlights of programs in the city focusing on diversity. Cheryl Reneé visited the Diversity in Education class in 2006 in order to obtain a human interest story. At that time, *The Sabre*, the CSU student newspaper, had just published what was being called a racist letter to the editor from a student who complained that African American students always get extra considerations and it was not fair. Ms. Reneé filmed a segment of the class where students in the class were outraged at the statements made in that letter and decided to write a rebuttal from the entire class. The letter the entire class created was featured and some students were interviewed, creating publicity for CSU, the College of Education, and the diversity class.

One Columbus sponsors several activities in which faculty, as well as students, participate. Ken Crooks, Executive Director of *One Columbus*, is a member of the Committee on Diversity and attends meetings regularly. These activities include: *Study Circles* where people get together to solve case studies in racism, and *Dialogue Groups* where people meet weekly to discuss relevant topics, hoping to find common ground on which to resolve community issues that are based on perceived racism or other problems of that

nature. One of the *Dialogue Groups* explored the topic, “What do Muslims really believe in?” That group lasted for seven weeks.

CHISPA (translation – “spark”) is the Hispanic organization that is partnered with the Committee on Diversity. Origins of *CHISPA* were originally funded by the Goizueta Foundation for recruitment and retention of Hispanic students in the Columbus area. Activities include hosting informational programs about college for prospective students and their families, mentoring middle school and high school students, and many more activities. The Mayor’s Commission on Unity and Diversity in Columbus also boasts active participation from the Committee on Diversity in the many activities (an International Festival and Women’s History Month, among others).

Future goals of the Committee on Diversity include:

- Continue to promote collaborations and partnerships as learning experiences that value a broad range of expertise to increase student achievement, equity, and access;
- Respect and build community capacity to improve student learning and achievement by connecting organizations with the College of Education;
- Practice responsible stewardship that encourages community organizations to share control of partnerships and collaborations.
- Continue to encourage membership and current participation in community organizations by Committee on Diversity members.

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