

Memorandum

To: University Senate
Fr: Michael H. Schill, President and Professor of Law
Patrick Phillips, Provost and Senior Vice President
Date: May 20, 2021
Re: Reports Due under Section 2.6 of Senate Motion US 19/20-18 (June 10, 2020)

Last June, the University of Oregon Senate passed resolution [19/20-18](#), “University Senate Resolution Against Racism and Systemic Oppression.” Section 2.6 of that resolution reads:

“...the Senate will invite an annual report from the Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence, the Multicultural Center, the Ombuds Office, the Dean of Students, and the Office of Investigations and Civil Rights Compliance on the kinds of experiences students report in UO classrooms and campus, both ones that increase a sense of belonging and that exclude or negatively impact Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander students, to heighten faculty awareness of how their teaching practices differentially impact students...”

This memo serves as a collective report in response to that section. We appreciate your inquiry and the motivation to learn more about these issues. Our partners in these units are immensely valuable, and their work directly with students is both impactful and, as you note, informative. Each of the offices has expressed a willingness to come to a Senate meeting if desired to share more about their work, engagement with students, current trends, etc.

The information collected here demonstrates the continued need for members of our university to strive to better understand the experiences of our students and work to increase their sense of belonging and inclusion. It also reinforces our decision to conduct an inclusion and equity climate survey in 2022. It makes clear the reasons why our commitment to enhancing equity and combating systemic racism remains a critical focus of the university. This work continues to be carried out through our university and unit-wide inclusion initiatives and diversity action plans focused on improving the experiences and success of students.

The information is organized topically, rather than by office, to help ensure that themes which cut across different units are reported together. This approach also helps de-identify information provided by students. Many of the offices you mention deal with confidential information or gather information with an understanding that the student wishes to remain anonymous about what they shared. As a result, anecdotal information is provided at a level which ensures it remains unidentifiable.

As a reminder, the information provided here is qualitative, not quantitative. It is reflective of the issues raised within these offices, often through self-reporting or anecdotal observation, and with many of these examples the “n” is small. That doesn’t minimize the importance of the observation or issue, we simply want to caution against extrapolating or surmising as we do not want to risk misinterpreting the students’ underlying experiences or intentions.

Finally, we recognize that the resolution called for examples of experiences that “increase a sense of belonging and that exclude or negatively impact” students (emphasis added). You’ll note that this report is about the latter. Given the nature of the work of these offices, team members acknowledge that students generally do not share information about helpful, supportive, or inclusive efforts. We will continue to try and learn more about those best practices which do lead to more inclusive classrooms and will share that with you as we do.

OFFICES REPORTING

Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence (CMAE)

CMAE is a place where students are empowered, engaged, and nurtured for success. Its mission is to promote student retention and persistence for historically underrepresented and underserved populations. CMAE academic counselors work alongside students to support their personal, academic, and professional goals. Academic counselors empower students to engage in their academic success through individualized academic counseling, programming and services, and connection to campus resources and referrals to community and campus networks. The multicultural academic counselors also include the affinity retention areas: African American/Black, Asian Desi Pacific Islander, Latinx, and Native American/Indigenous retention specialists.

Multicultural Center (MCC)

The MCC is a department of the Associated Students of the University of Oregon (ASUO) and serves as a hub of student activism, leadership development, educational and cultural workshops, signature programming, and civic engagement for more than 25 student organizations. With leadership provided by the Division of Equity and Inclusion, the MCC is able to provide a safe space for underrepresented students, and additional resources for academic and co-curricular support (i.e., computer lab, leadership library, videos, offices, meeting spaces, storage).

Office of the Dean of Students

The Office of the Dean of Students has several different programs and units aimed at building and strengthening community and the student experience. These include, among others: conduct and community standards; crisis intervention and sexual violence support services; fraternity and sorority life; the Holden Center; the Lyllye Reynolds-Parker Black Cultural Center; multicultural education, engagement and student success; multicultural and identity-based support services; non-traditional and veteran student engagement and success; parent and family programs; substance abuse education and prevention; and the UO Women’s Center.

Office of Investigations and Civil Rights Compliance (OICRC)

OICRC, formerly the Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity and the Office of the Title IX Coordinator, offers the UO community a place to discuss and report issues, concerns, and conflicts regarding discrimination and harassment, including sex- or gender-based harassment, stalking, bullying, or violence in accordance with university policy and federal and state laws. It supports students, staff, faculty, and campus community members by: promoting a learning and working environment free of discrimination and harassment; receiving concerns, reports, and complaints from any member of the UO community regarding issues of potential discrimination and discriminatory harassment at the university; investigating reports and complaints of discrimination and harassment; addressing and resolving concerns and complaints of discrimination and harassment through referral and collaboration with

various stakeholders and partners across campus; and, explaining and clarifying university policies and procedures, federal and state laws, and regulations regarding discrimination, harassment, retaliation, and equal opportunity.

Ombuds Office

The Ombuds Program (OP) serves as an independent, impartial, informal, and confidential conflict resolution resource for faculty, staff, and students. The OP provides a range of conflict resolution services to individuals and groups including conflict coaching, guidance on university policies and resources, management coaching, mediation, and group facilitation. In addition to the OP, the department includes a second alternative dispute resolution program, the Student Conflict Resolution Center. Both receive complaints from students and information from both programs is in this report. In FY20, the OP handled 375 cases and recorded 943 separate reported concerns. Students made up almost 23% of case visitors in FY20; in total around eighty cases were brought by students. 7.7% of visitors were undergraduate students and 14.9% of visitors were graduate students.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS (IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER)

Handling Difficult Conversations and Current Events

Some students say that faculty members were unprepared to address concerns of communities of color during classroom discussions, and students of color have expressed a need for more faculty training on how to conduct uncomfortable and/or controversial conversations in classrooms. This was exacerbated in recent years given current socio-political events impacting a variety of communities including, but not limited to, Muslim, Asian, and African American students. This also led to increases in feelings of “tokenism,” noted below.

Subject Matter Expertise Lacking re: Communities of Color Impacts or Perspectives

Students provided examples where questions were raised in class about how a particular topic under discussion related to or impacted different groups (particularly African Americans), and how faculty member and peer responses to these questions was often dismissive. In the case of faculty, this manifested itself by faculty stating the question was not relevant to the discussion, which seems to these students as a narrow interpretation of the event or topic.

Tokenism and/or Otherness

Students expressed a feeling of tokenism in class when discussing topics relating to cultural identity or race. Additionally, feelings of tokenism are emboldened when units (including academic departments) engage with underrepresented students or student groups only when a new faculty member is hired or a guest speaker is invited who is a member of an underrepresented group. Ideally, departments and units would grow relationships and connections in an ongoing fashion, not solely for purposes of targeted diversity events or cultural heritage month activities.

Additionally, some students reported that they feel as though they are in a “fish bowl” when community members—faculty, staff/administration, and other students—point to them, figuratively or literally, when talking about issues of race or identity, when taking people on tours (e.g., past the MCC), or when touting departmental or institutional accomplishments.

Grading or Academic Misconduct Concerns

Some students alleged bias in the grading process, though in most instances this was unrelated to protected status. In some instances, students who had been accused of academic misconduct raised concerns that they believed the accusation was related to race (usually African American students), though students simultaneously expressed a hope that this was not the case. In these instances, this invariably occurred when another student whose work was at issue was white and was not accused of misconduct. In some instances, students stated they had no opportunity to prove the misconduct accusation false.

Awareness of Demographics

Students of color reported feeling that faculty should be more aware of the various demographics in their classes, and they report a feeling that some faculty have lacked the cultural awareness and sensitivity associated with current events and the impact they have on underrepresented students and communities. Although cultural competency training has been recommended, it is also suggested that faculty engage more with the various strategies and working groups to build authentic connections, relationships, and awareness around culture and identity.

Greater Diversity Needed in Faculty and Staff Positions

Students articulated negative impacts of low to no faculty representation, especially across majors and interests. Such impacts relate to limited mentorship or research opportunities and the issues of faculty preparedness discussed above. Students also noted the need for greater diversity when it comes to advising support, making sure that identity-based positions in advising or counseling offices are filled and accessible.

Lack of Connectivity

Students shared that it is difficult to build peer-to-peer relationships when there are limited number of students with whom they identify in a class, and that this is particularly difficult during a time of remote learning. The social, engagement, co-curricular aspect is going to be in high demand with all students. Whether gathering at the Many Nations Longhouse or in the Multicultural Center, or simply meeting with peers after class, students do not feel as connected with one another, or to their overall academic experience. This is particularly acute with first-year students, whether freshmen or transfers, who have little or no connection with the university or their peers.

Classroom Engagement Expectations

During heightened times of racial reckoning and the political environment, the expectation to be involved or engaged in a class is even more challenging, particularly when layered on top of unrecognized trauma and even the normal stressors of being a student.

Desire for Greater Administrative Resources for Support Programs

Several offices reported hearing from students that there needs to be greater investment in administrative services to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and climate. For example, some graduate students in particular would like to see increased resources at the department level for diversity, equity, and inclusion training, awareness, and climate efforts.

Micro-aggressions and General Campus Climate

Some offices reported that students indicate micro-aggressions based on identity persist among their peers or at an institutional level embedded in certain processes and practices.

Safety of the Learning, Working, and Living Environments

In particular, FY20 brought about many concerns relating to health and safety, particularly connected to the pandemic and its wide-ranging impacts. This should not mask the fact that some students also report concerns of safety relating to gender-based or racial injustice concerns. These manifest for students of different backgrounds.

Discourteousness

Several complaints alleged that faculty have been discourteous in their communications with students, including that faculty members have yelled at students or actively ignored them. Students with a disability or with another protected status are likely to perceive such treatment as being related to identity as opposed to concluding that a faculty member may generally be discourteous to students or was having a bad day.

Trust Gap

Some students of color indicated that they are less likely to share challenges and negative experiences due to a trust gap. This was emphasized by student activists who feel they have been negatively labeled as troublemakers, agitators, or disruptors, and do not often feel heard or respected by faculty, staff, or administrators. This note relates to others, above, regarding how students are heard or respected when asking questions or raising issues, and emphasizes the opportunity to build rapport and relationships throughout the year, not just when a particular issue arises.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS/OBSERVATIONS (IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER)

While the resolution specifically asks about experiences impacting “Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander students,” we also offer below some observations and information shared by students regarding disability, gender, or other issues as we believe this information can also be useful as you seek a greater understanding of the impacts on students in the classroom.

Overall Student Well-Being

Mental health and financial concerns have been rising in recent years across many student populations. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues. Faculty should be aware, in general, of the many difficulties facing students, which can impact academic performance. Some often-cited examples include: lack of financial resources due to personal or family job loss; childcare needs, particularly with remote schooling or shuttered day care; impacts from contracting COVID-19 or anxiety about the possibility of contracting COVID-19; difficulty of accessing effective mental health therapies remotely, particularly in shared living environments; cultural barriers to seeking mental health services; and longer time-to-degree stress resulting from the inability to get necessary credits (such as labs) or from taking fewer credits due to overall remote fatigue or other burdens.

Departmental Climate

Both undergraduate and graduate students reported that departmental climate (and departmental conflict) has a significant impact on their success as students (i.e., students can sense when there are tensions within a department, even if those tensions are not in the classroom). This is not isolated to any particular department.

Disparate Gender Treatment in Classrooms and Processes

A few students complained that faculty treated male students more favorably than female students, that faculty made statements to the effect that it was more difficult to teach female students than it was to teach male students, and that male faculty were more likely to be discourteous to female students. Additionally, some students expressed concerns about discrimination and misconduct reporting processes, particularly when it related to gender-based behaviors.

Faculty Use of Appropriate Pronouns

Students reported that faculty were at times insensitive to mis-gendering concerns of transgender and non-binary students, even after concerns were expressly raised. (In other words, that after being informed of a student's appropriate pronoun following use of an *assumed, but incorrect* pronoun, insufficient effort was made to correct or that faculty members were dismissive.)

Ableism and Class Recordings/Closed Captioning

A few students reported that the unwillingness of some faculty members to provide class recordings as a matter of course feels like ableism because it fails to recognize there are students who, for myriad disability-related reasons, are unable to attend class from time to time and/or would benefit from being able to review lectures to support their learning. From their vantage point, the unwillingness to provide recordings tacitly implies that students should grasp and note course content at first pass during class, which is challenging for students with certain learning disabilities. Other students reported concerns that a lack of closed captioning on video classes also creates an impact, particularly on students who have hearing-related disabilities.

Denial of Accommodations by Faculty

Several students alleged that faculty did not provide accommodations that had been approved by the Accessible Education Center (AEC). The AEC is responsible for determining appropriate accommodations for students with diagnosed disabilities. Students are responsible for advising faculty of their accommodations, and faculty are responsible for implementing in-class accommodations. The most frequently approved accommodation is additional time for exams. Several students reported being denied accommodations noting that, as a result, they were not as successful as they would have been had their accommodation been provided.

Lack of Faculty Responsiveness

A few students reported that some faculty remain unresponsive, even after multiple email requests for meetings and assistance, which is a great source of frustration. In particular, students report concern about the disproportionate impact of this on students with learning disabilities. Depending on the nature of a student's disability, it can take a student much more time to read or process material. As a result, not receiving the help they need can have an outsized impact on their time and preparedness for exams.

Bullying Due to Video Learning

Some students experienced bullying from classmates due to their home dynamics being on display in virtual classrooms. This experience was exacerbated when some faculty members made it mandatory to have cameras on during class.