

Actions to Strengthen Inclusion

Voices from the Diversity Conversations

Background

This project was designed to inform the results of the Diversity Study, conducted by the Grand Valley State University in 2005. That study found that the experiences of faculty, staff and students varied based on their status as members of the majority or a minority group at GVSU. Those who indicated in the survey that they were a member of a minority were more likely to feel less accepted, more likely to hear disparaging remarks and more likely to have feelings of negative treatment.

The results of the Diversity Study prompted GVSU to probe further for understanding about the difference in feelings.

Over the early months of 2006, a series of conversations occurred to hear from members of those minority groups. The conversations covered topics such as acceptance, remarks and treatment. These were conversations between people who were willing to come together voluntarily and talk about personal experiences and observations and were conducted to gain insight that could inform the GVSU planning process with concrete suggestions for action. The individuals who participated were not "representatives" of minority groups and were not asked to speak for other people.

What is offered here are not the results of a research process, not research "findings". They do not represent the opinions or suggestions of the entire university population and are not "truth" in their simple form. They represent the voices of individuals who are part of the University community and who willingly stepped forward when given an opportunity to speak from their truth.

In that context, they are simply the truth.

Voices

Conversations occurred between people from a number of minority communities on campus. Those included students, faculty and staff who are people of color, disabled, GLBT and of various religious affiliations. People were invited to participate in the conversations through traditional networks and also through a general invitation. What follows is a list of the actions recommended by the groups who came together.

Over-arching Message

The conversations call Grand Valley State University to continue efforts to move the commitment to diversity from a separate initiative to an integrated part of the university's commitment to excellence. Concretely this means that diversity needs to continue to be internalized at GVSU: To not be added to how the university does work but to be a part of the way the university works.

The conversations suggest that while the goal is integration, systems that support minority populations are necessary to encourage the voices to be recognized, heard and honored. Some

individuals pointed out that while systems might exist but spoke about situations where such systems were either not known or not safe for some Grand Valley State University communities members.

The action items are offered to assist in the movement and are offered in two groups, access and accountability.

Access

Support and expand a community where both majority and minority voices are noticed, recognized and celebrated

- Have visible multi-cultural offices and space for university organizations that support minority communities
- Have on-going dialogues structured to bring the absence or presence of minority populations into the university dialogue
- Celebrate departments in the university where diversity is the way of doing business
- Create mentoring systems for minority populations
- Encourage university leadership to participate in events to be seen (as supportive) and to learn (through dialogue)
- Include “inclusive” language in leadership messages
- Review university benefit and policies and practices to address equity and move those policies (partner leave policy; recognition of holidays) and practices (inclusion of partners on directories and invitations)

Accountability

Support and expand a community where policy is clear in practice

- Incorporate diversity in the goals of the university, in department evaluations and plans
- Include diversity training as an on-going option (i.e. Institute for Healing Racism model expanded and for other minority issues) and in routine orientations
- Develop a goal setting process that includes student/faculty and staff recruitment, retentions and promotions to expand the representations of minorities at Grand Valley State University
- Report on a scheduled basis to the university community about actions and progress toward diversity goal achievement
- Acknowledge the risk involved for minority faculty, staff and students in speaking about disparaging remarks and negative treatment by creating or re-enforcing a system where they are protected (i.e. a route to speak when an issue occurs such as an ombudsman office)
- On a structured, routine basis solicit feedback from minority communities on campus as to treatment and acceptance
- Address any incidence of negative treatment with clear action and account to the university community as to the outcome of that action

- Articulate the extent to which GVSU actions to impact diversity are the result of feedback from community (i.e. how does this process inform and influence action) so that participants can feel that they have been heard

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Summary Responses to Conversation Topics

Experience or time when you felt acceptance and appreciation at GVSU

I feel acceptance in the general community:

- When consulted about experience; to educate
- When not put on the spot = *Don't make me speak for people like me**
- When treated by students/staff (and GLBT partners) as an equals, normalized, not unusual
- Campus organizations, groups (National Coming Out Day, Out and About, Organization for the Advancement of Disabled Students, Multi-Cultural Center, etc.)
- Seeing Johnny Title, Mark Zupan, Trevino = *Support for them felt like acceptance for me*

I feel visible and active support from all levels of staff, faculty:

- Seeing President Murray, faculty, staff participate at diversity events, workshops
- Having University leadership engage in informal conversations, hear questions from leadership, staff and students that expand university concerns to include the implications for minority groups
- Having my partner included on rosters, in invitations and a consideration when personal situations occur
- Hearing from leadership on the academic side of the university that it is understood that promotion opportunities might be influenced by

What would help to increase feelings of acceptance and appreciation or create change in the culture/climate at GVSU?

Visible and active support from all levels of staff, faculty that would help with acceptance?

- Support of leadership must start at the top, be visible and consistent with more involvement from administration and faculty
- Seek donors of various political, ethnic and religious groups
- Create and/or communicate a safe route, contact, to go to when there are issues to report, with results and feedback
- Put policy in place, HR policy, others= *Are there supervisor evaluation forms that can be turned into HR?*
- Expand persons in top places that reflect multi cultural and diverse life styles
- Recruit staff, faculty who represent diverse cultures = *See more role models, people like me*

What would increase sense of inclusion, community?

- Increase events that foster inclusion and dialogue
- Events not seen as "special" but part of mainstream series of events

*Italics indicate individual quotes or remarks quoted multiple times

- An accessible, highly visible multicultural center where people are comfortable
- More resources, educational, and first hand answers in person
- Inclusive person-first language, inclusive language practices from the top down
- Specific university action in benefits including and beyond the partner debate= *Presence of partnership language in leave language*

Accountability would help create an accepting climate:

- *Don't tolerate biased, genderized, racist language or actions*
- University, administration, needs to make public statements, and take actions in support of issues
- Policy is needed, actions and consequences, must see commitment from top, not just lip service
- Eliminate fear when it is not safe for those that are disabled= *It takes to long to move class to an accessible location and when students miss too much of it and it is to late to withdraw, they have to take the class over*
- An ombudsman (or counselor) could assist minorities with faculty when they are not positive about accommodations (i.e. around disabilities) or difference (of political or religious affiliations)

Education would help:

- Pictures that have variety and include images, language that are inclusive of diverse couples, lifestyles
- Interaction, dialogue, workshops, form action plans around these conversations
- Diversity/awareness/sensitivity training at the department level (like the healing racism workshop for other areas) *People need to hear the stories...hear what it is like to live as a person who is not part of the mainstream culture?*
- Learn about service dogs and how to treat them

Have you heard or had personal experience with disparaging remarks and/or were you treated negatively or witnessed same?

Yes and it stems from the lack of Accountability:

- Acts of hatefulness, violence, not handled publicly or consistently= *If GV doesn't hold what's unacceptable accountable, people will think it's ok and this is the way things are supposed to be*
- Gender slurs, even written, white boards used for slurs= *Comments are ignored or allowed to pass by and if they are to be addressed it is the minority that has to speak up...We have to hold them all accountable*
- Have to be constantly on guard, feel threatened physically, feelings of fear for being different
- Inclusion of diverse points of view or perspectives on a classroom topic not universally supported, left to informal treatment= *I expect professors to educate us about diversity; I don't want to have to be the speaker in the classroom for all. I want to be like the other students, I don't want to be put on the spot unless it's mutually agreed-upon*

Yes and it stems from the lack of visible and active support from all levels of staff, faculty:

- Not a progressive system or open minded, afraid, faculty and administration won't do something that affects important people, donors
- Administration tolerates racism, sexism, homophobia in words and actions by not having systems in place

Yes and it is a lack of awareness and education:

- Comments are mostly informal and over-heard- *I Hear horrible things about what marriage is and about homosexuality – these are people I study with and will be colleagues with – students in social work say things about homosexuals like “I can't help them, they are dirty, I can't understand them”*
- There is division on campus around religious differences that could be reduced through learning

What do you think can happen to eliminate this kind of treatment?

I will feel visible and active support from all levels of staff, faculty to eliminate this kind of treatment:

- When the top levels show their support by including “Zero tolerance” as a core university value, speaking out when an incidence occurs and reporting the action taken and results
- When the top levels talk about the goals for a diverse university= *What do we want to look like in faculty, administrators, staff and students...we are not U of M but we can not be Allendale either.*
- When there is Increased accommodation and accountability in evaluation and promotion systems= *Get faculty and staff credit for community work and it should be required to show their community work in those different from the mainstream*
- When there is public follow up with action from these and other meetings
- When all levels of staff, students, faculty and administration have access and are required at some level to participate in education on acceptance

I will feel a sense of inclusion; community can eliminate this kind of treatment:

- Through expanded academics, more liberal programs bring more diverse students, staff
- The reporting of university progress in the hiring of diverse people and a documented public plan to spend money on them and their recruitment
- Through specific policy changes = *Partner benefits; Martin Luther King's birthday as a University holiday; The honoring of non-Christian religious holidays*
- Seeing GVSU participate in diverse and public events that celebrate diversity
- Evidence of the presence of minority communities through visible organizational office space and resources= *The GLBT community needs a space or at least a desk and a telephone. It is difficult to organize a community without a place to be*

I will feel that there is accountability in efforts to eliminate this kind of treatment:

- *Enforcement of the zero tolerance for racist, sexist, homophobic or other anti-minority language, actions, hate crimes is a number one university value that used as a university standard and included in planning, in evaluation, in promotion and in curricular standards*

- Show consequences consistently through clear reporting when allegations are filed, investigations completed and consequences assigned
- Publicize that these things (hate crimes, etc.) are being handled and that this university is standing against oppressive behavior
- The connection of diversity efforts to actions= *Show that outcomes come from these conversations; we've had them before*
- When oppression is reported to administrators, a response is received and a workshop or something concrete is created to address that issue and that is communicated in some fashion to the university community
- Physical accountability of the cultural center=*Move cultural center to central location, not so scary, more resources and accessibility*

Perception of GVSU commitment to diversity?

- *There is not a 100% commitment to diversity because of the lack of inclusion in benefits*
- *Professors do not encourage, attend or make available programs, workshops, about diversity*
- *There is not an accessible system that faculty can assess to file complaints related to promotion discrimination that protects them*
- *Departments are allowed to have significant control over their diversity program because it is not integrated into the evaluation system*
- *Actions to formally institutionalize diversity policies and to informally integrate inclusion and tolerance into the university practice are not visible*
- *GVSU does not "look" accepting ... have efforts to increase minority administration, faculty, staff and students been successful and what does success look like*
- *Needs more unisex bathrooms, housing (transgender and others)*
- *Conversations have not led to changes and if changes have been made they have not been tied to the process that brought them forward*