

PSU continues to struggle with diversity issues

Commentary by Vivian Smith

As Penn State strives to achieve its diversity goals as mapped out in The Framework to Foster Diversity, 2004-2009, the report states that “there has been only limited progress in developing a curriculum that fosters intercultural and international competence” among students.

The University Faculty Senate recently modified the requirements for United States (US) Cultures and International (IL) Cultures, or diversity requirements, so that undergraduates must complete at least three US credits and three IL credits. Six credits do not necessarily prepare a student to function in a global society.

The larger challenge is infusing multicultural and diversity issues into every Penn State class. Simply put, faculty need training on how to weave various concepts related to diversity into the very fabric of their curriculum through choice of language, readings, examples, various learning activities, and group assignments – not just dedicating the last week of class to

“multicultural perspectives.”

Modeled after a similar program at Colorado State University, the faculty seminar “Infusing Multicultural Perspectives in the College of Agricultural Sciences Curricula at Penn State” informs faculty multicultural issues.

The project, funded by the Office for Educational Equity, was a “collaboration of faculty and administrators who have an interest in incorporating multicultural issues into the curriculum at the higher education level,” said Nicole Webster, assistant professor in Agricultural and Extension Education, in the project’s video.

For three years, beginning in 2000, Barbara Wade, Senior Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) Program’s coordinator, and Cathleen Love, former assistant to the Dean for Minority Affairs in the College of Agricultural Sciences, coordinated the infusion project.

The most important part of the project was sharing what multiculturalism meant to the individuals personally and how they

could change their attitudes.

“It became a discovery process. Initially, [multiculturalism was defined as] different cultures, black and white,” said Wade. “Then we started saying, ‘Well, wait a minute. It includes gender.’ Then it evolved into something more. Everyone got more creative and thoughtful about what multiculturalism is. We also discussed what the terminology is: Do you accept, tolerate or respect [different cultures]?”

Twenty-three faculty members—many of them senior faculty—from the College of Agricultural Science participated in the project. “No one was required or forced to be there,” said Wade. “We had guest speakers, readings, videos and discussions addressing strategies on how to infuse diversity throughout a course. People would linger [after the class] and continue the discussion. It was a sign that there’s a genuine interest. It was so powerful.”

Catherine G. Lyons, the assistant to the Dean for Minority Affairs, as well as the Assistant Professor of Agricultural and

Extension Education, attended the infusion project and noted the commitment of the faculty members. “People were willing to stay, even after a full workday.”

The key to faculty training in curriculum infusion is direct ownership of ideals conveyed within the seminar.

“Talking and lecturing at people just won’t work. They have to own it,” Wade said. “Some people would bring in new ideas – another guest speaker, a new reading, a different location.”

For example, Wade explained how Dan Fritton, professor of Soil Physics, would mix his students in groups that represented their geographical diversity.

“It turned out to be phenomenal. It translated in a way I never thought about. At the end of our program, people felt more committed and interested in terms of diversity,” she said.

In addition, there were attempts to replicate the infusion project in science, but it was not well publicized and people were “too busy,” said Wade.

“What an over-achiever.”



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