Central Connecticut State University

Blue Ribbon Commission on Diversity

Report to President John W. Miller

July 15, 2008
Introduction:

The issue of diversity and the University’s promotion of this value as part of its university culture have been questioned in recent years, with many believing that Central has not adequately or successfully embraced the promotion of diversity at all levels as a priority for the University and its students. Despite numerous efforts launched by the administration, faculty and students to promote awareness and, in some cases, address the perception of insensitivity, the perception that the administration has not done enough persists. Regrettable events of the past year have exacerbated the problem and have resulted in a mass of activities by nearly every constituent group on the campus. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, there is continued concern about the lack of a coordinated, systemic approach in addressing diversity throughout the University and about its long range success or impact.

As part of a report submitted to the Board of Trustees, fifty-one (51) recommendations have been submitted in response to concerns about diversity and the negative campus climate. These recommendations are part of three separate reports as well as other recommendations made to the University: a report from the Faculty Senate, which included a survey of the faculty; another from the Task Force on Journalist Integrity and Responsibility; a Gender Equity Study by the Faculty Senate Committee and 2006-7 Faculty Senate Diversity Committee; as well as recommendations submitted by AAUW, Student Government, and various CCSU administrators. Various faculty and student groups were asked to review, augment, modify and prioritize the recommendations.

As a result of concerns raised in the past year prompted by two articles in the student – run newspaper, The Recorder, President Jack Miller formed a three-person Blue Ribbon Commission on Diversity in October of 2007. They are:

Mr. John Motley, Connecticut State University System, Board of Trustees Member
Dr. Carol Virostek, AAUW Connecticut, President
Ms. Yvette Meléndez, Connecticut State University System, Chief of Staff

Blue Ribbon Commission’s Charge:

To provide assistance in creating a positive campus climate that espouses diversity as a core value of the University, and to gather information from the campus community so the Commission can make recommendations to the President for improving the campus climate.
Process:

The Commission’s inaugural meeting was on December 5, 2007. It met an additional seven times. The Commission was able to make an assessment of the perceptions on campus through conversations with several CCSU administrators including: President Jack Miller, Provost Carl Lovitt, Interim Diversity Officer Ernie Marquez, Vice President of Student Affairs Margaret Toston, and Chief Human Resources Officer Anne Alling.

The Commission reviewed many documents, including several reports previously submitted, which outlined recommendations on steps that might be taken to improve upon the campus climate on issues of diversity. Open forums with broad representation from the campus community including faculty, staff and students, were held on April 15, 2008, as a means to allow for direct communication by both individuals and members of various constituencies. The Commission met with the following organizations/individuals:

- Latin American Association
- Provost Diversity Committee
- African Studies Center
- Commission on the Concerns for Women
- Faculty Senate Diversity Committee
- PRIDE
- Student Forum
- Administrators, Faculty & Staff Forum

Observations:

- Many felt that the administration’s reaction to the Recorder’s satirical article on rape in the spring and to the cartoon incident in the fall was tardy. As a result, actions and responses on the part of the administration were viewed as insensitive, reactionary, random or simply “too little too late”.

- Efforts on the part of the administration to address the issues have been fragmented and incoherent. Lack of coordination has resulted in a series of activities and responses that are not sustainable and have no real way of impacting a longer term solution. Activities and programs are not tied to a larger strategic vision for the University or a plan for utilizing the issue of diversity as a tool for the overall well-being and success of the University.

- There does not appear to be a locus of leadership on the issue of diversity; nor does there appear to be a bridge in addressing the issue between the faculty and staff and the students, unless it is through individual faculty.

- Many genuine efforts do not seemingly receive the support they may otherwise receive, partly due to the fragmented implementation of the events. In addition, there is no campus-wide knowledge of all activities.
There appear to be gaps in service to students. Certain segments of the student body, specifically the GLBT population, feel marginalized due to a lack of student support services and bigotry on the part of other students.

While the current members of the Blue Ribbon Commission made every effort to ensure access to every affected group within the University community, clearly we do not feel that we had the broadest representation possible.

Recommendations were made by the African-American and Latino faculty groups for the inclusion of at least two to three additional members from outside the University. While we were not aware of this request, we believe that this would have been helpful. At a minimum, it would have been responsive to the organizations that made the request, and it may have brought a broader perspective.

Despite the critique made by many, in some quarters of the University, such as the Women’s Center and Women’s Studies faculty, there is a recognition and appreciation for the efforts that are being made by the President and the Provost, in particular, to create awareness and address the campus climate.

**Recommendations:**

1. The most pressing need is for strong and visible leadership with a consistent and coherent message about:
   - what is expected of all members of the university community, and
   - how the President and his senior administrators seek to heal the campus community.

   The Commission recommends that the President sponsor a Convocation on Diversity at the start of the new academic year that will set the tone for the campus and clearly establish his values and goals for making Central Connecticut State University an institution of higher education recognized for its inclusion and promotion of fairness and diversity.

2. The President should develop a campus-wide strategic plan for the University that has the University’s core values, one which has Diversity as a core pillar supporting all of the University’s programs and services.

3. In addition to the President, the Vice President of Student Affairs carries significant responsibility for the establishment of a positive, student-centered environment. Of great concern to the Commission, was a sense by students that the officer charged with carrying out responsibilities directly related to their welfare, was not accessible to them. The new person hired into this position must:
• come with a clear sense of the needs of the University
• possess skills sets that have been honed specifically to tackle the gaps in service that appear to exist, and
• have the ability to quickly instill confidence in students at Central that the administration and all who work at the University have the best interest of all students at heart.

This will be one of the most critical hires for the University. It will present a wonderful opportunity for the University only if a very talented and skilled individual is placed in the position.

4. The Provost should immediately review faculty assignment for reassigned time and ensure that the allocation of such is being done in an equitable manner without regard to race, ethnicity or gender.

5. The President should examine the manner in which communication is shared within his senior administration, within the faculty and staff, and with the overall University community. Tools that are currently utilized to malign faculty, such as list-serves not owned by the University, should be reconsidered for continued support.

6. The President and senior administrators should look for opportunities to extend the borders of the University to diverse communities beyond New Britain, such as Hartford. Central Connecticut State University should look for opportunities to partner with school systems, community organizations and others and should be clearly visible in major events held in Hartford.

7. Counseling staff should be made available and trained to address the concerns of the GLBT community of students, who now can only rely on sympathetic gay or lesbian faculty for support or problem solving related to their emotional and academic needs at the University.