
Remarks for the Diversity Workshop

L. Jay Lemons

Wednesday, August 22, 2007

1:15 – 2:45 p.m., Stretansky Concert Hall

Good afternoon and thank you for being here.

Scrolling behind me today have been excerpts from the AICUP Diversity Study we participated in the spring of 2006. We thought it would be useful for you to be able to see some of the thoughts of our students on the subject of diversity as we begin our work here today. These responses are broadly representative of some of the open-ended questions from that survey. On the quantitative measures where peer comparisons are possible, our data looked very much like that of our sister colleges that participated which included a couple of the 24/7 comparison group. Under any circumstance, what has rolled across the screen and what is contained in the survey results demonstrates that we have much work to do in realizing the community of diversity and inclusiveness envisioned in the strategic plan.

Johnetta Cole, former president of Spelman and Bennett College said:

The more we pull together toward a new day, the less it matters what pushed us apart in the past.

I think that speaks volumes about why we have devoted the time, energy, and resources we have to diversity. Over the last five years, we have engaged with each other in important conversations about the importance of diversity and the university's commitment to become a more diverse community. This has been an appropriate focus for us as we embrace the benefits of a diverse community and the positive impact working and learning in a diverse community has on the educational experiences of our students and on our experiences as individuals. An important milestone in this journey was reached when the faculty and the Board of Trustees adopted the university Statement on Diversity and Inclusiveness.

As we have explored together the meaning of diversity and what it means for Susquehanna, we have discovered that, in the words of Chaplain Radecke, that there is "diversity about diversity" that is manifested in a disconnect between *being diverse* and *valuing diversity*. Enrolling and retaining a diverse student body – with diversity broadly defined – is an important strategic goal that is more about academic and inclusive excellence than about demographics (although it is impossible to achieve that excellence without a critical mass of people representing the range of human diversity). As you know, over the years, I sit with small groups of seniors, usually over a meal, and ask them three questions, one being "If they were the university president, what would they change." Along with the pleas to move SU to the shore, I have been both pleasantly surprised and also challenged, truly, by the frequency of comments about diversity. These come often from white students who want SU to be a more diverse place and to truly embrace diversity. They understand full well that the most powerful learning environments are diverse and inclusive and they know full well that SU does not represent well the larger world that we are preparing them to help lead.

Some want to believe that the wrongs of the past have been remedied and that our country has escaped its sad history of discrimination and inequality. While we have clearly made great

progress, I was struck by a note that came to many in the Susquehanna community from Anna Makatche of the class of 2006. Anna is involved in Teach for America and she wrote about her first year in the program. Hear is some of what she wrote:

As you may know, I just completed my first year with Teach for America teaching 5th grade dual-language in Washington Heights, New York City. As one of my TFA compatriots put it so well, this was "the best and the worst" year of my life – incredibly challenging in every sense of the word, but also eye-opening, inspiring, and ultimately very humbling.

I was astonished at the challenges facing the under-served schools in our nation. While Teach for America had prepared me with statistics about the achievement gap, nothing could have prevented the initial shock I encountered on the first day when I welcomed my students into a school not yet ready with organized class lists, much less clear curriculum and schedules for the teachers. The nightmare of the bureaucracy which continued to unroll before me was overwhelming, frustrating, and mind-boggling; if I could not even figure out what to teach among such a mess, how were my students supposed to learn?

But, here's where the inspiration comes in – my little group of fifth graders were not only eager to learn and ambitious to succeed academically, but they were also patient as I gradually found my footing as their instructor. However, it was my little munchkins who were reeling when I revealed to them their actual reading levels – among 17 students I had a range of reading levels from kindergarten to fifth grade... only one of the seventeen was actually on grade level. So, we set for ourselves a goal of two years of reading growth in one academic year, increased the independent reading time at home, and busted our butts in school to get it done. And, by the end of the year, it was done – more than two years' worth of growth in one academic year. But, these intelligent, ambitious, and capable students have seven more years of schooling in a system which has already failed them once.

Her words speak to the challenges that continue in our country. Here in this beautiful valley, I know that it remains difficult for students from diverse backgrounds to be students at Susquehanna. Certainly our graduation rate for minority students is – and should be – a point of pride and I am grateful for all who nurture and embrace our students. But, even the students who we consider successful experience some alienation here. Just last week, Linda, Phil, and I had the opportunity to spend time with two alumna who shared with us their reflections on their SU experiences within the larger context of their lives after graduation. Both African-American, they conveyed to us the burden and resulting fatigue they felt from their time here. One of them shared with us an article written by a school psychologist and a counselor who have worked in independent schools. It is a short piece and one I would commend to all of you as it highlights some of the special challenges that students of color experience in predominantly white institutions. While the authors are talking about independent schools, a great deal of what they have to say is applicable to us. Copies of that piece are available in the lobby. And while these two young women are able to articulate the sense of isolation and fatigue they felt at SU, I want to assure you that they love this place and so many of you who made a great difference in their lives. They simply want us to learn, to do reach further, to be open to a deeper understanding so that we can be an even stronger and better place.

Those of you who saw Denise Hughes' senior performance recall her focus on her need to wear masks while at SU and her courage and bravery in revealing the depth of her experience. The AICUP Diversity Survey results scrolling when you came in bring to light much more about the experiences of our students – whether they are students from diverse background who feel expected to “speak for their race” in any and all situations to those who represent diversity of a different kind, religious, sexual orientation, class ore even political, and shared the challenges they have faced to those from majority backgrounds that are mystified or confused by it all.

Finally, Phil Winger and I were privileged to spend a few hours with about a dozen of our African-American students last spring in wake of the letter published in the Crusader that questioned whether these students belonged at Susquehanna. Emotions were high, expressions were intense, and there was a great deal of difference among the group in processing the letter and the subsequent events here on campus. What was clear to me was a reality of the lived experiences for our students of color that is not what have conceived for ourselves in the strategic plan.

My point in raising those examples with you today is not to create hypersensitivity. In fact, I do believe many of our students are already there – students also tell me that they don't know how to talk to each other for fear of unintentionally offending or setting off racial tensions. I give those examples as a way to bridge our understanding about the importance of diversity with the reality of our students' day to day experiences. The institutional excellence that comes with more perspectives in our classrooms, offices, and work spaces requires actions to effect institutional culture change.

The charges set forth in the strategic plan have yielded mixed results. This year, for the first time, we will have reached our goal for diversity in our entering class. More than 12% of the Class of 2011 are students of color. We have reached, too, the goal for faculty of color. But, we have not done all that we can and haven't gotten as far as we've wanted. We have had some painful moments; but, have new opportunities before us.

In addition to helping all of our students be successful, our faculty is moving ahead with dispatch to implement the new Central Curriculum which includes a strong diversity component. I salute the faculty for their work on the curriculum and especially for the ways in which you have sought to embrace more fully the broad range of human experience in meaningful ways as a core part of the educational experience of every student. Your curricular efforts are vital as we would be falling woefully short if we simply left the critical work in multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusiveness to the co-curriculum.

I am disappointed but not surprised to tell you that our effort to become a Posse Partner institution fell short again this year. At the same time, I heartened to tell you that our persistence has been noticed and recognized by the Posse Foundation. One of the distinguishing aspects of their program is a multi-cultural retreat that is aimed at impacting as many as 100 students. Debbie Bial, the president of the Posse Foundation, at my request has agreed to work with us in having a retreat involving our students. These are powerful experiences in the lives of those students from partner institutions and have been important catalysts on those campuses for deeper understanding.

These are but two of the larger institutional initiatives that are intended to move us forward to truly embracing differences.

What we will do today is move from large institutional efforts to individual office efforts to embrace difference and promote diversity on our campus. Today, I ask you to work with your colleagues to identify actions within your work groups to put the Statement on Diversity and Inclusiveness into action.

In June of this year, the senior staff participated in a retreat that focused on diversity. Margaret Regan, who has devoted much of the past 25 years to issues of diversity and inclusiveness in the corporate world, shared with us a framework for change that helped us to frame much of the work we plan to engage in the coming months. She spoke of the “when” of change relative to our institutional culture. In order for us to be diverse and inclusive, we first need to break with the past and build energy to encourage behavior change. I believe we are there. We must now underpin change with structure and process that allows us to embed a new, richer, and more inclusive culture at SU.

Conversations around diversity are difficult because comfort zones are tested and the blind spots that we all have are revealed in sharp relief. Margaret also challenged us to lead from the heart – to find in our individual experiences the beauty of all who make up this community. I also heard in what Margaret was saying about leading from the heart that it is important for us to take some risks in acknowledging our shortcomings and blind spots.

I know I have blind spots as I suspect we all do. In thinking about some of my own, I want to express my thanks to those of you who taken the risk to share with me the mistakes I have made along the way here. From the comical (and mildly embarrassing) occasion a few years ago when Nonie Martin’s partner, Henry, shared with me that my attempt to say Happy New Year in Spanish had resulted in my wishing everyone a “happy new rear end” to the more mundane like the colleague who shared with me that I had for three years repeatedly said “Imhoff” – not “Imhoof” when referring to the lead singer in Faculty Lounge, to another of you who shared with me that David Bussard really hates being called “Dave” which I had used for my first five years here; And more seriously to the courage Simona Hill demonstrated in sharing with me the anguish my invitation to faculty and administrators from minority populations caused for some of those persons in joining the Board in conversations about their experiences here. Well-intended and sincere as were my intentions and those of the Board, there is little doubt that it also added to the burdens of difference and spotlighting that impact these individuals. Coupled with the examples I shared with you earlier from the African-American alumnae, the powerful work of Denise Hughes, and the pain I heard from our students last spring I know that I have blind spots borne of ignorance, insensitivity, or privilege that are not helpful to nurturing our community.

We are first and foremost a learning community. I am grateful for students, alumni, and colleagues who have contributed to my own learning and increasing understanding. I hope we can find the courage, strength and grace to help one another learn from each other. That is perhaps the most important way we can continue to push towards the fulfillment of the community we hope to achieve. We need to be better equipped ourselves to engage in these conversations and to find better ways to help our students to do the same.

I close my remarks with a task for you. In small groups with your colleagues, I’d like for you to consider two questions:

1. How will the Statement on Diversity and Inclusiveness be addressed in your work this year?
2. What resources will be needed for you to do this work?

You will be given a worksheet that has the seven bulleted items from the statement. Please use these as your focus and report back to department head within the next week. I will also ask that the worksheet be made available electronically for those of you who would like to transcribe the work you do here today. I invite you to any of the classrooms in this building, Apfelbaum, or Bogar. You're also welcome to return to your offices or to take up this work wherever you wish.

I can begin with some of the actions of the President's Office: [Only a few examples are provided here....]

- Embodies a commitment to civility and rich dialogue where all people can share their perspectives in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding;
- Adopts policies and practices that protect the rights and dignity of all persons and which provide equal access to resources;
- Seeks actively to recruit and retain students of diverse backgrounds;
 - *Provide resources, human and financial, to nurture partnerships that are beginning to bear fruit. These include Camden, Prep4Prep, and others.*
 - *Continue efforts to become a Posse partner institution.*
- Seeks actively to employ persons of diverse backgrounds in all categories of employment;
 - *Enhancing the affirmative action process for hourly and administrative positions to attract a more diverse pool and to provide opportunities where appropriate for persons from diverse backgrounds.*
- Encourages and expects teaching and advising practices and professional behaviors that promote critical engagement with diversity;
- Challenges myths and stereotypes; and
- Fosters the development of cross-cultural relationships marked by mutual curiosity and respect.
 - *Signed agreement with the University of Macau, which represents our first substantive relationship with an institution in China; Jim Brock will be there during the spring semester along with we hope 8-12 students*

Today, we begin anew to articulate together the kind of community we want to be. The Statement on Diversity and Inclusiveness is an explication and an important first step. Now it is time to think together about the next steps we must take.

We are moving from talking about diversity to acting for diversity. To that end, I want to remind everyone that in my response in the spring of 2006 to the Presidential Task Force on Diversity, I made a number of resource commitments. Sadly most of those funds went unused last year. Thus I want to reiterate that we have made available resources to assist you in accomplishing some of the initiatives you outline today. So, Linda has said that I should encourage you to “think big!” So do it . . .

The reality is that we all have something to do to help our institution move toward becoming a more inclusive one. There is progress that we all can make; but, we need to push each other and trust each other. This is hard work to do and I appreciate your willingness to engage in it with me.