

International Fair: A Cross-Cultural Proposal

Overview: The Selinsgrove community's general population is reportedly 94.7% white (US Census FactFinder, 2017). The lack of cultural diversity is prominent within the area and has historically negatively affected Susquehanna University students of color. Actions of members of the community have caused many students to feel unwelcome and unsafe and has thus strained the relationship between SU and the community. We believe hosting an international fair in which students possess the opportunity to display and discuss their GO exploration or individual cultural origins with members of the community will both educate the general public and improve the relationship between SU, SU students, and the community.

Background: There are a few major differences between the town of Selinsgrove and Susquehanna University that contribute to the lack of student-resident integration. Selinsgrove has historically been a town with a majority of white, as well as politically conservative, residents. In general, Snyder County has voted Republican in the last five Presidential elections in which the last election, 71.1% of the county voted for Republican candidates (Best Places). In fact, Susquehanna University has been credited for the existing diversity in terms of age and race. The differences between the two entities in demographic and political leanings have created a social rift that neither the university administration nor the town's leaders have fully recognized or attempted to mend. Historically, students of color have expressed concerns about not feeling welcome by town residents due to their race or ethnicity and many have even reported incidents of racism and aggression. This also has effectively polarized the two communities. The fewer students of color that feel welcome within the town, the fewer that visit businesses downtown and contribute to Selinsgrove society. As it is perceived by those on campus, without much exposure to other races, ethnicities, and cultures, the predominantly white town has continued to exhibit limited understanding and tolerance for students of color.

During interviews conducted as part of the NEH Grant it was found that fifteen percent of respondents were not in favor of increasing town residents' cultural awareness and about fourteen percent refused to answer the question. While this leaves a majority of positive feedback, many of the negative answers were aggressive or insensitive. One interviewee responded: "That's a tough question to answer, you're getting on a touchy subject. That one religious' group, you know the one that I'm talking about, with 9/11; that's a hard one to get over. I don't know how that relates to your question..." Many of those who disagreed also refused to identify the lack of cultural awareness as a problem at all, such as one respondent who stated the locals are not *racists*, but are afraid of the drugs that the minorities bring from where they originated. The issue, therefore, lies in the lack of action taken by Susquehanna University and the town of Selinsgrove to communicate the social problems that continue to aggravate relations. On October 9th, the university held a public forum with a panel of local business owners and leaders in an attempt to open communication between the two entities in order to begin a more integrated relationship. Unfortunately, the incidents of racism were not acknowledged until a representative of S.U.'s Black Student Union asked what the panel members were willing to do to improve such tensions. The participants were not even aware of such issues nor were they equipped to offer any solutions as they were defensive, confused, and uncomfortable with the question. It was a clear representation of how rarely the complaints of

students of color are considered in conversations of mending relations with the town and the university, however, as seen in the interviews conducted as well as conversations initiated by students of color, there is now an opportunity to begin efforts of raising cultural awareness for both the town and the university.

Recommendation: Given the information in the above sections, the best course of action is to establish an International Fair. While we acknowledge that a current study abroad fair exists and is run through the Global Opportunities office, we seek to connect the people of Selinsgrove and the students of Susquehanna via a public display of the Global Opportunities program. The International Fair would be run by student interns housed in the GO Office with a faculty member volunteering to oversee the planning of the event. The event would be modeled after the Market Street Festival that occurs once a year in the fall. Ideally, the event would take place on Market Street as a way for students to showcase their study abroad trips to the community. Students would be incentivized to participate via class credit offered in their GO Reflection courses. Rather than assigning a final paper for students, they would be allowed to plan a table to be featured in the International Fair. Tables would represent the countries that students studied abroad in, while also featuring students who attend Susquehanna but are from another country. We decided to go with the name ‘International Fair’ so that students of non-American backgrounds can also participate and share parts of their culture with the larger Selinsgrove community.

While there will be no cost of admission to enter into the fair itself, there will be charges from table to table with certain parameters for costs set by the event planners in the GO office. Students will be encouraged to run tables that feature food local to their study abroad country and play music traditionally associated with their country. Businesses would be provided with booths, or tents for the duration of the Market Street shutdown and would provide food, clothing, or other items they may want to sell. It would be encouraged that businesses provide food from countries other than the United States as a celebration of international countries although it would not be a requirement for their participation. In order to offset the cost of shutting down Market Street for a few hours, the funds raised from the students at their tables would be donated back to the GO Office. Additional money can be kept in a fund designed to offer scholarships towards students in need when preparing for their GO trips. Additional money may also be used to donate to the GO Office’s charity of choice.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: The benefits of having an international fair for both the community and the campus are immediately apparent. As the town forum showcased for us, race relations between the ever-diversifying campus and the people of Selinsgrove is a bit strenuous, and some data we found through interviews backs this up. From our in class interviews we found that of one hundred and fifteen respondents, eighty-three (or about seventy two percent) were in favor of having some sort of cultural awareness brought to Selinsgrove, fifteen respondents (or about thirteen percent) were not in favor of bringing cultural diversity to Selinsgrove, and the remaining seventeen (or about fourteen percent) abstained from answering the question. What this data set shows is that a large majority is in favor of cultural diversity in Selinsgrove meaning that if we go through with this, there will be attendees and people who’d like to bring upon

change here in Selinsgrove. The other aspect with this data is the seventeen percent who aren't in favor, or couldn't care less, are still exposed to the event. Part of our goal is to unite the uniqueness of the campus with the life of downtown Selinsgrove. This seventeen percent represent a completely different walk of life than what is present on campus. By having this cultural fair, it will not only help broaden the horizons of the town folk to our way of life, but also present an opportunity to our students to learn about the town folk and their own way of life.

With high benefits also comes high costs. For one, our plan involves closing the main downtown area, of which permit alone will cost about \$150, as well as the factor of the businesses downtown which will also need to agree to participate. While that may seem difficult to achieve, part of our goal with this cultural fair is to also expose students to the downtown life. If we allow businesses downtown to also participate in the fair, they will not only be receiving free exposure, the attendees would be more than happy to spend money at The Kind Café or BJ's fair booth, effectively negating possible disadvantages that could come from closing down business for the day. Another cost for the International Fair would be obtaining, transporting, and setting up all booths for the event. This would be easily achievable because Susquehanna University often holds events and lunch-ins with plenty of tables and chairs, and while setting up each booth will take some time, the task could be delegated to the booth organizers to set up. This leaves us only with the transportation of the tables and chairs, but with enough volunteers and vehicles it should be achievable.

Something that may appear to be a cost, but is secretly a benefit, is using GO program students to run the booths. While it is understandable that not every student will be highly enthused at managing a booth all day, by linking it to their GO program final, it will encourage students to do better and try harder to make their booth the best possible one it can be. As it currently stands, students need to write a paper at the end of their GO class after studying abroad for a semester, and coupled with other finals and work, students don't want to be working a paper during this time. What our fair will do is break the monotony that is just writing papers for grades and give our students a proper education of what is happening both around the world with GO programs, but also locally here in Selinsgrove.

References:

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