

2005 Diversity Summit Summary and Assessment of Outcomes

During the 8th Annual Diversity Summit on January 21, faculty, students, and staff worked together to assess the campus climate. They participated in several different activities, offering their views, experiences, and suggestions for improving diversity at the university. Themes emerged throughout the entire event, many of which asked for action on all fronts. Calls for changes in training and curriculum, university communication, policies and procedures, participation by administration and faculty, and diversity-centered opportunities dominated the dialogue in each activity. Participants voiced their weariness with talking and emphasized the need for university-wide action and visible commitment from all. The following is a summary of the results of this event.

Activity 1

Groups were asked to respond to five visions of transformation regarding diversity on campus by providing their own images, markers, and other indicators that would point to progress toward a more inclusive, diverse, and welcoming environment. The results were varied in the way each group formed and reported their answers. There was also answer crossover from question to question, which underscored the recursive nature of diversity in the lives of faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders. Overall, the majority called for:

- mandatory sensitivity and diversity training for all;
- more opportunities to work, play, interact, and grow together;
- diversity incorporated into core courses and other courses in all departments;
- better communication both university and community-wide;
- improved student and faculty recruiting practices;
- a clearer definition of diversity;
- better policies and procedures in regard to diversity issues; and
- less incidents of hate crimes and discriminatory language and acts.

Section 1

Vision: **“Where students, faculty, and staff are conversant with a diverse society and have knowledge, understanding, and respect for difference”** Predominate images surrounding communications and interactions included:

- more diversity among faculty and students;
- less incidents of discrimination and hate crimes;
- open communications among people without fear of attack, including vigorous debates and appropriate language;
- a clearer, inclusive, universally-used and accepted definition of diversity;
- diversity announcements in class;
- a campus-wide non-discrimination statement on syllabi;
- diversity apparent in all forms of communications across campus;
- greater awareness of hidden disabilities;
- diversity issues presented in core curriculum classes; and
- mandatory programs and training courses for all groups.

Section 2

Vision: **“Where diversity is inclusive and infused throughout the institution’s activities/events”**

The most common indicators of a more welcoming community were:

- improved communications when promoting events, especially in the CT and campus activity calendar;
- activities include more diverse groups;
- diversity activities occur year-round and not just during national holidays;
- more funding given to the Cranwell Center;
- ADA accessibility at all events;
- increased celebration of MLK’s birthday;
- more diversity activities university wide;
- mandatory diversity course included in their curriculum;

- better student and faculty recruiting and training practices;
- increased retention of students and faculty of underrepresented groups;
- more participation in events from administration, faculty, and other leaders;
- more diversity in leadership and faculty positions;
- inclusion of diverse populations in all aspects of academic, extra-curricular, and co-curricular facets of the university life;
- visual art and events showcasing diversity; and
- greater collaboration between organizations and groups.

Section 3

Vision: **“Where the education and understanding of diversity by all constituents (faculty, staff, students, alumni, leadership) is a priority”** Responses to this section seemed to be focused mainly on changes in policies and procedures that have the potential to shift the power of those members of faculty, staff, administration, and leadership who do not support diversity to the people in the university who are have shown more commitment to a more inclusive campus. Such as:

- required faculty training for more overall diversity awareness and understanding and tenure;
- training programs for faculty focusing on integrating diversity into the classroom;
- faculty offering students more opportunities to connect in class;
- less threat of retaliation if a student addresses a diversity issue; and
- the university goals of diversity written in syllabi and other official documents.

Development of courses and more obvious indications of changes in attitude were also stressed in this vision:

- core courses would cover diversity issues;
- new course content in current curriculum would include diversity and cultural issues,
- a diversity minor would be offered to all major;
- university-wide commitment to the celebration of difference – not a “one size fits all” expectation;
- stereotypes would be broken down;
- increases in retention of faculty and students of differing cultures and races;
- equity in benefits and compensation and affordable childcare;
- people would be rewarded and held accountable for their attitudes regarding diversity;
- dining halls and other convenient venues would be used to present diversity issues; and
- events would be less like the summit and more about the celebration of change and difference.

Section 4

Vision: **“Where educational diversity is promoted as value-added and an enrichment to the lives of all”** Once again, many called for required diversity and culturally-focused courses for all students, especially freshmen.

Additional common markers and indicators were:

- policies in place to ensure larger numbers of underrepresented groups;
- awards to those who contribute to diversity;
- an expanded definition of diversity;
- increases in freedom of expression;
- increases in participation at events;
- better understanding of other cultures in all settings; and
- an overall awareness of the issues surrounding the university community locally and globally.

Section 5

Vision: **“Where a diverse society is understood and celebrated”** An overriding vision of genuine, internalized dedication to diversity was a common thread, through responses, such as:

- privilege disappears;
- all people are celebrated;
- diversity is clearly defined;
- where VT is know as a welcoming community;
- the entire university has a soul-level appreciation of other cultures;

- diversity is tied to social justice and equity;
- VT folks realize that their ways are not the “normal” way; there is no right or wrong;
- those who exhibit and acknowledge difference are celebrated;
- cultural mixing, not segregation;
- people of color and women can honestly say that the campus is conducive to their success;
- respect for individuals and no stereotyping of different groups; and
- students of marginalized groups would feel welcome on our campus and able to learn and grow from one another.

Activity 2

Participants were given draft copies of the Virginia Tech Principles of Community to review and make recommendations. These recommendations were taken into account as the final version was created. The document was presented and signed at the March 14, 2005 Board of Visitor’s meeting. The following is the text of that document:

Virginia Tech is a public land-grant university, committed to teaching and learning, research, and outreach to the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world community. Learning from the experiences that shape Virginia Tech as an institution, we acknowledge those aspects of our legacy that reflected bias and exclusion. Therefore, we adopt and practice the following principles as fundamental to our on-going efforts to increase access and inclusion and to create a community that nurtures learning and growth for all of its members:

==> We affirm the inherent dignity and value of every person and strive to maintain a climate for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding.

==> We affirm the right of each person to express thoughts and opinions freely. We encourage open expression within a climate of civility, sensitivity, and mutual respect.

==> We affirm the value of human diversity because it enriches our lives and the University. We acknowledge and respect our differences while affirming our common humanity.

==> We reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including those based on age, color, disability, gender, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status. We take individual and collective responsibility for helping to eliminate bias and discrimination and for increasing our own understanding of these issues through education, training, and interaction with others.

==> We pledge our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of the Virginia Tech motto of Ut Prosim (That I May Serve).

Ben J. Davenport Jr., Rector, Board of Visitors
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 Association

Myrna Callison and Yvette Quintela, Co-Vice
 Presidents, Graduate Student Assembly
 Kimball "Jay" Reynolds, President, Virginia Tech
 Alumni Association
 Ray Plaza, Chair, Commission on Equal Opportunity
 and Diversity

Activity 3

The following are the results from Activity 3, which asked participants to respond a series of situations. These scenarios involved classroom climate, university relations, and email communications. The overall responses to these situations were underscored by outrage, embarrassment, and sadness. It is clear from the consistency of the recommendations that in order for the campus climate to improve everyone should take a more proactive role and be held accountable for their actions. The majority of the participants agreed that the administration plays a key role in changing and enforcing the policies and procedures that would discourage these types of abuse.

Situation: A student with a documented learning disability was told in front of her classmates that if she needed extra time on a test that Virginia Tech would be too tough for her and she should think about leaving.

All participants responded to the above scenario by calling for action by the administration. All participants felt that the issue should be addressed with the following actions:

- ensure that speaker/teacher know the laws and incorporate disability into faculty training;
- ensure the syllabi have disability notices;
- discipline or even dismiss the faculty member;

- have the faculty member in question apologize to the student and the class;
- provide student resources to help with any residual problems that may occur as a result of this incident;
- offer more teacher evaluations throughout the semester; and
- provide more ways for students to file anonymous complaints.

Situation: *LGBTQ students are constantly harassed. Flyers posted on campus which advertise their events are often more likely to be ripped down within hours of posting. During one week in the Fall, their program flyers were taken down daily in an academic building. In another instance, a gay student encountered hateful graffiti and urine on his residence hall room door.*

All participants agreed that changes in the way the administration reacts to these types of offenses and an increase in sensitivity and awareness training for all were needed actions. Responses to this situation centered on the need for:

- students to have an opportunity to vent and for administration and faculty to provide them more sincere, visible support;
- students to have some formal diversity instruction;
- open dialogue about the issues;
- administrators and faculty to address such ignorance at Virginia Tech;
- the president, administration, and media must attend the events diverse groups hold; and
- more aggressive, consistent discipline for hate crimes and discrimination should be the rule university-wide.

Situation: *An African-American student and her family checked in for Summer Orientation at Cassell Coliseum. After completing the check-in process, and seeing no other family that looked like them, they walked back to their car and went home.*

Reactions to this situation centered on the need for more sensitive recruiting practices and increased services for minority students. All participants agreed that these actions were important to increasing diversity and improving climate on campus. Common suggestions included:

- draw prospective students' attention to the messages we send about the diversity at VT;
- involve VT community in recruiting and working with African American families;
- improve the truthfulness of the recruiting materials addressing diversity;
- introduce African American organizations at VT during recruitment and orientation;
- promote diversity scholarship;
- promote togetherness rather differences; and
- enforce "VT Principles."

Situation: *On a departmental listserv set-up for students in that particular major, someone started a discussion thread about the football team and certain players. This led to various negative and derogatory responses that created a dilemma for that department. The department ended up closing the listserv.*

Even though many participants felt that such communications should be regulated and monitored to insure appropriate discussion, many saw the use of technology as means for increasing dialog and fostering better campus climate. Examples from the responses include:

- provide separate forum for discussion on these issues under intellectual guidance of faculty;
- discipline the students and provide diversity awareness training;
- coordinate an open meeting to address the issue;
- use technology to help encourage constructive conversations regarding climate; and
- develop online courses addressing stereotypes and prejudice.

Situation: *Deaf parents of a new student never heard a word during opening session of Summer Orientation - as the staff "forgot" to use the close-caption videos that day.*

Once again, the issue of improved recruiting practices was brought to the forefront in response to this situation.

Participants recommended that the administration:

- offer an apology to the family and provide the information they missed;
- advise such families to seek ASL assistance immediately; and

- permanently institute new procedures to eliminate the possibility of this happening again.

Situation: *In the days following 9/11, groups of students appearing to be of Middle Eastern descent were taunted and harassed as they walked along the Drill field. Such comments as “go home,” and “why not blow up some buildings, so we don’t have to go to classes?”*

Faculty, students, and staff all agreed on the need for all people on the campus in the community to take more action to eliminate this type of harassment in the future. They also provided suggestions for more giving more proactive assistance to victims. Administrators and faculty were held accountable for taking the following steps in those directions:

- comfort harassed students and offer them counseling;
- identify the attackers and take appropriate disciplinary actions (suspension, for example);
- provide sensitivity and diversity awareness training for all;
- increase university leaders’ presence in minority community;
- administrators should address the VT community in response to this type of abuse;
- recruit minorities in meaningful positions, such as academic deans, chairs, and departmental heads; and
- larger events showcasing diversity should be offered to the surrounding community.

Situation: *A professor commented that if he had his way all of the girls would be rounded up and put into liberal arts-where they belong. Another female student asked her faculty member for help-the professor responded that he could not teach the topic to a dog.*

The majority of the participants felt that both the faculty and the administration should be held accountable for eliminating this type of situation. The following policies, procedures, and actions were presented by all groups:

- professor should be made to apologize to the students;
- someone from the administration should meet with students on this issue;
- the situation should be reviewed addressed by the Faculty Dean, the Provost and the OEO Office;
- establish a list of offenses that resulted in termination for both tenured and non-tenured faculty;
- administration should implement a No Tolerance-Statement;
- faculty members should have to attend sensitivity and diversity awareness training;
- students should always have the right to formally and privately comment on the classroom climate issues, with their complaints reviewed by university officials; and
- reinstate the Dean of Students position.