

Campus Climate Focus Groups

We held three focus groups as a follow up to the Campus Climate survey that was conducted two years ago. The results of the original survey (see Assessment Annual Report 2002-2003) indicated that three groups felt lower levels of inclusion, acceptance, and experienced higher levels of prejudice: African-American faculty and staff, Asian students, faculty, and staff, and Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual students. The survey results also indicated that minority students, faculty, and staff endorsed the value of diversity and inclusion more strongly than the dominant (Caucasian) group. The SAARC chose to conduct focus groups with students who fell into the three minority groups identified above to explore these concerns more fully. We conducted three focus groups in the late Spring of 2004. See Appendix D for summaries of those conversations.

Facilitators were trained by Rosa Nigro and a consistent methodology was identified. Three questions were asked of each focus group:

Within the context of cultural diversity.....

1. What do you like about Mississippi State?
2. What do you not like about Mississippi State?
3. What solutions or suggestions for improvement do you have?

International students:

- These students reported overwhelmingly that students, faculty, and staff at MSU are pleasant, cooperative, and friendly.
- They noted that the meaning of “community” is different here than in their home countries, that people are more individualistic here.
- They noted that the lack of “family” was ameliorated somewhat by a strong network of “friendships” here at MSU.
- They applauded the high academic standards at MSU. They noted the adequacy of resources, including the library, the facilities, and the shuttle bus on campus.
- They enjoyed the quiet, rural atmosphere.
- They noted that international students appear to feel more comfortable socializing with other international students from the same home country.
- They noted that they seem to be more accepted by the campus community than by the Starkville community. They attributed this difference to the higher level of education on campus.

In terms of what they disliked, they noted

- Admissions requirements seem outdated, and also incongruent with the high academic standards. In other words, they expressed concern that admissions requirements allows them to enter the university then struggle academically. They saw this incongruence between admissions standards and “real-life” academic standards in the colleges as false advertising, as a true disservice to students. By outdated, they pointed to the requirement of SAT scores for international students.

- They expressed displeasure over the health insurance requirement
- They expressed concern that tuition exemptions only exempted 70% of their tuition costs.
- Regarding programming, participants noted that programs offered by ISO have diminished significantly.
- They expressed concern over the general lack of social opportunities on campus after dark.
- They expressed concern over the lack of public transportation available off campus.
- They expressed frustration over the early closing times for local businesses.

Solutions offered consisted of ISO offering more programming.

For the African-American student focus group, the following information was solicited.

What they like about MSU:

- Campus activities and services, including the library, the shuttle buses, the physical facilities.
- The amount of cultural and ethnic diversity on campus.
- The student organizations
- Instructors are available and reasonable.

What they did not like about MSU:

- Crowded classrooms
- Lack of parking
- Lack of things to do after dark
- Shops close too early
- No public transportation

Their main concern that was discussed more deeply was the following:

- A perceived lack of equitable opportunities at school, such as scholarships and jobs. They particularly pointed out that instructors do not tell them about these opportunities.
- They noted that their relationships with Caucasian students, while polite and friendly, seem superficial and limited in scope.
- Possible solutions include greater training on diversity for faculty and staff, and an encouragement of faculty to apprise all students of professional growth opportunities.

GLB Student Group

What do you like about MSU?

- Friendly and civil atmosphere
- The university is perceived as making an effort to be more inclusive: SA gov't candidates visited the GLBF this year; Counselor Education, Sociology, and Psychology have invited the GLBF to speak to classes about sexual orientation issues; Counseling Center is perceived as making strong efforts to reach out to this population
- The recent addition of sexual orientation as a protected group in MSU's affirmative action statement.
- Specific offices were viewed as gay-friendly:
 1. Counseling Center
 2. Psychology
 3. Sociology/Social Sciences
 4. Provost
 5. Housing
 6. Anthropology
 7. Liberal Arts Office
 8. Student Life
 9. Sanderson Center

What do you not like about MSU?

- Lack of cooperation by cafeteria personnel when trying to place trifold on the tables. His/her request to set out this publicity was met with disdain.
- The lack of visibility and presence of GLB issues on campus. People's assumptions that there are not many GLB folks present on campus.
- The felt value that they are "expected" to remain invisible so that homophobic individuals are not made uncomfortable. The sometimes expressed belief by homophobic individuals that being open and honest equals "flaunting their lifestyle."
- The sense of fear and threat in the residence halls to being truly "out."
- Great hostility noted toward gays and lesbians in the Greek system; gay and lesbian Greek members are afraid to attend GLBF meetings for fear of being "outed" and consequently expelled from their Greek organization.
- Hostile comments and threats directed toward a recently established gay fraternity.
- Being harassed by passers-by when engaging in public displays of affection (holding hands with partner while walking across campus).
- Greater fear of physical attacks on gay men than on lesbian women.
- Worry that the "group think" and conformity in the Greek system would enable a group of hostile individuals to physically attack an openly gay male.
- Those who remain closeted expressed great anxiety about being inadvertently "outed" by either their mannerisms, their dress, or the company they keep. They expressed that much psychological energy is consumed in

worrying about these issues and protecting themselves. They pointed out that remaining closeted hampers the developmental process, both individually as well as in developing relational and intimacy skills. Feeling the need to remain closeted is essentially very isolating.

- Signs advertising gay events have been perceived as being torn down at a higher rate than the signs of other types of events.
- Offices viewed as particularly hostile or unfriendly to gay and lesbian students include:
 1. Athletics
 2. Engineering
 3. Campus Activities Board (CAB)
 4. Longest Student Health Center
 5. Greek Life Office

Suggestions to improve the campus climate include the following:

- More campus-wide, university sponsored activities addressing sexual orientation issues. The forum on gay marriage was strongly commended.
- A freshman 101 class that addresses diversity issues more systematically
- Address diversity issues more specifically and concretely during Orientation; set the expectation for respect and tolerance early.
- Gay pride events
- A Student Affairs office for GLB issues
- Move the GLBF (recently renamed Spectrum) from the Counseling Center to Holmes Cultural Diversity Center, so as to lessen the stigmatizing or pathologizing message associated with the Counseling Center
- Reflector coverage on the new non-discrimination statement; more coverage on sexual orientation issues.
- More indepth diversity training for faculty and staff.
- Student Affairs facilitate “round table” discussions between straight and gay students so as to challenge prejudice and stereotyping.
- Invite noted gay or lesbian speakers to campus, such as Billy Bean.
- The Counseling Center should offer a support group to GLB students.

Conclusions from Focus Group Feedback

1. More social events are needed for minority students, especially international students.
2. More evening events are needed for minority students.
3. More interfacing and intentional connecting is needed between cultural and ethnic groups on campus. African American students feel marginalized by their lack of access to informal networks of knowledge, mentoring, and opportunity. Primarily, they feel that Caucasian students often know about academic and professional opportunities through informal networks such as

their sororities, fraternities, faculty mentors, clubs, etc. The level of social segregation present on campus often serves as obstacles for African-American students in that they don't hear about or feel invited to participate in professional and personal growth opportunities.

4. In the same vein, international students should be offered programming that allows more relational interface between cultural groups.
5. Small group forums or round table discussions should be held by Student Affairs (with trained facilitators) to begin building respectful and empathic connections between straight and glb students. This type of interaction puts a human face on prejudice and is a powerful antidote to hatred.
6. Campus to Town public transportation should be made available and advertised.
7. More substantial and in depth diversity training is needed for faculty and staff.
8. The university needs to do more work to convey the message of appreciation for differences, including sexual orientation.
9. Greek Life needs to develop a proactive plan to sponsor more integrative activities and knowledge sharing between Greek organizations and minority groups.
10. Campus Activities Board (CAB) needs to address the perceptions of prejudice toward GLB students and proactively reach out to these minority populations.
11. Engineering should develop affirmative action programs for GLB students
12. Athletics should address the high levels of homophobia and prejudice present in their culture.