**Report to the Special Task Force**

**Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project**

**Prepared by,**

**Susan B. Murray, Ph.D.**

I want to thank the Special Task Force for inviting me to speak today.

I want to begin my comments by contextualizing my report. I will then discuss some of the findings, and finally make some recommendations about how I think we might proceed. I will keep my comments to 20 minutes and then remain to answer your questions.

The Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project (CCFGRP) was initiated at the request of the Campus Climate Committee (CCC), was a Presidential advisory group composed of faculty, students, administrators, and staff.

The Campus Climate Committee originated in 1995 under President Robert Caret as part of the university’s plan “to address the needs of the campuses ‘growing ethno-diversity’ which was identified as ‘having the potential for separatism and antagonism’” (SJSU, 2002. P.4 as cited in Brooks-Immel & Kelly)[[1]](#footnote-1). President Caret designed the committee to report directly to him so as to have better oversight of the plan.

As part of the effort to assess the need for more “inclusive excellence” on campus, the CCC, in collaboration with Office of Institutional Research (Now Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics) conducted three campus-wide, campus climate surveys (2006, 2008, 2010). These surveys were designed specifically for SJSU.

This Survey data – available on line – indicated “Most faculty, staff, students, and administrators report somewhat favorable or favorable perceptions of campus climate at SJSU.” However, the survey data also indicated that among faculty, staff and students: 1) women describe the general climate as more “sexist” than men, 2) gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons view the climate as more “homophobic” than heterosexual persons, and 3) people of color experience discrimination based on race more than white people.

The Focus group project was designed as a “follow-up” study to offer a deeper understanding of these survey results.

The survey research and focus group Study were both PRO-Active attempts to be progressive around issues of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and heterosexism on our campus.

So many campuses approach these issues in a very reactive manner. Something happens- like the incident here – and then people decide to take action.

The CCC and research conducted under its direction were all about taking action first. Getting out in front of these issues.

Now, While the incident on campus was blatantly racist, much of the racism and sexism we all live around is constituted by much more subtle, unintended, micro aggressions. Though we legislate civil rights and pass policies which insist upon inclusion – we still cannot control how people think, feel, and act. If people keep showing up in the same way in their daily interactions we will keep recreating social inequalities through our actions – regardless of our intentions.

So, as we stated in the Executive Summary, the FG report was intended as a tool to be used to be pro-actively.

We wanted to help people recognize their own unwitting collusion in supporting systems of social inequality. And to help them be able to see they have different choices and to make different choices.

We also wanted to provide SJSU with more scaffolding to make the necessary institutional changes.

As I explained to administration when I first submitted my report – this report – though difficult to read - is a positive step for SJSU – this report puts us at the cutting edge of really being able to make the necessary shifts in self-awareness.

The people who took part in these focus groups did so in a spirit of pro-active progressive action.

This first step in creating a *more* accessible environment is to understand – from another’s perspective – how that environment is currently experienced

Before moving on to a brief discussion of some of the findings, I want to make one thing clear: the experiences of the students, staff, and faculty in these reports ***are not unique to SJSU***. These things are happening at every university and in workplaces across the country. The difference is that we were willing to look at them.

**Findings:**

In the Recommendations Section of the Executive Summary (authored by myself and Demerris Brooks, campus Ombudsperson), we state:

“We encourage all persons reading this report to pay careful attention to your own reactions to the stories contained herein. Pay special attention to those places where you find yourself the most “defensive,” “resistant” or “shocked” by what you read. Often the most emotionally evocative passages indicated areas we need to work on.

Judge Cordell has asked me to speak to findings from all six student groups. What I’d like to do now is to pull out some “moments” from each of the student reports that illustrate the usefulness of these data in being able to provide a window into those spaces where the campus climate is perceived of as problematic by our students.

**From: Black Student Report:**

In the Classroom: (p. 15) Representing the Race:

There are a lot of quotes where the students talk about feeling like they are being asked to represent all black people – I will read one that I think captures the essence of what they are saying: A woman student says,

 *“I have no problem answering questions that are related to the curriculum. But when it comes to me being a voice for the whole African American community, that’s when it’s like, ‘Are you serious, like, can* ***you*** *be the voice for your whole entire,[community]’ – it just gets really frustrating to me.”*

And it should be frustrating: Students come to our university expecting to become educated. In the classroom, the professor is the “expert” – while we can ask our students to be experts on their own experiences, we cannot ask them to be responsible for all others in their identity category. To do so underscores the professor’s lack of preparation. If I am giving a lecture on Black Family life in the US, I’m the one with the answers to the questions on Contemporary Black Family life – not the Black students in my class.

The African American students also talked about more blatantly racist assumptions begin made about them- this next piece underscores the complexity of finding solutions that don’t recreate the problem. On pg. 17 of the report, one of the men in this student group commented: *“I was talking with an advisor in* [department]*, and he mentioned something about certain faculty expecting black students to fail.”*

Now here is a student going to an adviser – and our students cn be very resistant to seeing advisers (for a lot of reasons), but here the student goes to their adviser and the adviser tells the student “*faculty expect Black students to fail*.” We don’t know the intention of this adviser – they may (and probably do) perceive themselves as an ally to this student – giving him the “back story” to prepare him to succeed, the “you have to be twice as good” speech. But if you think about it in a different context you have to question the overall “supportive” nature of a statement like this. Say you are a new faculty member, or new employee and a senior faculty member, or your supervisor says to you, “you know, people around here expect you to fail at this job.” How supported would you feel?

**From: GLBT Student group p. 35**

Note: This was the first focus group I conducted – since that time the campus has made significant progress in creating visible and institutional support systems for our GLBT student. LGBT Resource Center, Peers in Pride Mentoring Program, GLBT themed housing, and the Student Health Center has made tremendous strides in providing services to our trans students.

Having said that, the day to day micro aggressions against our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and expecially our transgender students continue…

In the Classroom (p.35), Being Out:

The students talked at length about “being out” and “not being out” on campus – especially with their professors. Towards the end of this discussion one of the students – in defending the decision to not come out - said:

“*Especially if you're here on scholarship and you need to keep your insurance and all that. If a professor said, ‘Well, I don't agree with your decision, or I don't agree with your expression, I'm gonna fail you*,’ *of course you would have some sort of recourse. But who knows – it’s a case of he said she said. You don't know that you have the backup from the school. You don't know if you have protection from the school. We don't know if that professor is tenured and you can't touch them. You don't know anything about what goes on outside of that classroom. So, disclosing is almost not an option.”*

In this case then, not knowing that they have “*the backup from the school*” speaks to the heterosexism of the larger institutional context of the university. If the overwhelming message is one that assumes heterosexuality rather than assuming diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions from SJSU students, then students really can’t discern who their allies might be.

Here again is a teachable moment for the rest of us: regardless of how we see ourselves in relation to all things LGBorT, As one student articulated, “*simply not being discriminatory is not enough to make a student feel safe.*”

“[in] *order to make you feel open, a professor would have to actually go out and talk about LGBT issues and talk about race or ethnicity or ability issues, in order to make you feel like that’s something you could even expose*.”

**From: International and Immigrant Student Focus Group** (p. 52)

One of the themes arising from the international student group was an overall sense of isolation from “American” students. They talked a lot about spending more time with other international students than with American students. This idea of separation is indicative of more than just this group. It is a theme throughout the student report.

Another Issue, Racial Mapping in the Classroom (p. 52)

In the report I also discuss the idea of racial mapping in the classroom. What I am referring to here is as set of expectations from both professors and students about who is in the classroom, and the significance of where they are in the classroom. The first part of this understanding – the Who part – has to do with having the wrong face in the wrong place. Some majors, some courses are dominated by students from particular racial-ethnic groups. So when students cross into other racial territories this is sometimes met with the question “are you sure you are in the right classroom?” As professors we all ask this on the first day of class. But generally we ask it of all our student – this is Sociology 175 – are you all in the right class. But when a student is singled out and asked this question repeatedly – in perhaps more than one class in their major – then they start to get the underlying message that they do not belong.

Regarding the second point – the “where” in the classroom. The international and immigrant students were very aware of racial territories in the classroom – particularly during those moments when professors dismantled them:

***An African Immigrant student:*** *“I’m sure [professors] do know [that students are racially divided in the classroom]. I guess you see that they realize the divisions when it’s time to take the tests, because they make sure that we’re [African students] between every couple of them [Vietnamese students], you know. They separate us pretty well. Some of them that are concerned about cheating”* [African focus group, 2000].

Similarly, a Vietnamese student described the following situation: *“Of course the instructors they don’t say directly to you or show directly they discriminate. But, one of the instructors caught a Vietnamese student cheating, and since that day on, every time we take a test, everytime that class takes a test, the teacher separate the Vietnamese students. They didn’t let the students sit close together. It was true that some of the Vietnamese students were cheating, but don’t assume all of the Vietnamese students do so.* [Interview – Feb. 2002].

In each of these cases the classroom is perceived of as a racially divided space. And, Professors ***are perceived of as*** sanctioning these racial divisions, unless the class is taking a test.

Though we cannot know for certain the intentions of either professor, for the students the classroom is clearly an interactional context where racialization takes place.

**From: Latino Student Focus Group p. 63.**

Like the students articulated in the Black student focus group, the Latino students talked about being perceived by others through the distortion of stereotypes about Latinos and Latinas:

As one of the men commented*: On a personal level, I walk around as a Chicano, as Raza, and I don’t feel welcome here. I feel like people look at us or look at me, and stereotype us right away, whether [they are thinking] he’s a student or not, or a stereotypical gangster or drug dealer or something.*

And in another instance, a Latina describes an interaction she had with an SJSU alumni on campus:

*“I’ve had a person in [my department] who is a State graduate say-- and I know it was a joking matter, but I mean, still, you don’t say it no matter who it is, he was like, ‘Mexicans go to college? What? You guys actually like to go to school?’ And I’m like, ‘Yes. Yes we do,’ like, don’t even go there. You know? He doesn’t know me. He doesn’t know anybody’s experience. So how can he just judge? You know? I mean I-- I come from east LA. That doesn’t mean I was ever a Chola or I ever did anything wrong? I don’t have any tattoos. I don’t have ten kids. So it’s like who is he to judge? Who is anybody to judge who you are by your presence, by your last name, by your language or whatever?”*

And, Like the other student groups, the classroom for Latino student was often fraught with racial tension. In response to such tension the students report that they find themselves “*holding back*,” “*not speaking*,” and “*never expressing myself completely*.” In their perceptions, the consequences of not participating (which they seemed well aware of), were outweighed by the possible downside of, “*saying the wrong thing*.”

*“I know I shouldn’t hold back what I have to say, but I-- I never express myself completely. I don’t want to get on, especially, the teacher’s bad side ‘cause they give me grades.”*

**From: Vietnamese Student Focus Group: Something Missing p. 76.**

One of the key points raised in this focus group had to do with the issues of representation of Vietnamese culture and history on campus. This same theme was echoed by the white students but in a very different way. For the Vietnamese students, they see the vibrant Vietnamese community in San Jose, and they see the celebration of diversity on campus – but they don’t see Vietnamese culture and history being celebrated on campus.

“*Recently,[[2]](#footnote-2) California passed the resolution for Black April Memorial Week from April 23rd to April 30th honoring the Vietnamese, and people who died in the war. So, if campus can do a Black History Month, I appreciate that on campus we can have a week or two for the Vietnamese people or the Vietnamese students too – because that’s part of history, why we’re here, and why we come here.”*

Not only do the students see themselves as missing from the diversity landscape, they also draw on this to justify their own resistance to participating in the celebration of the diversity of others:

*I don’t feel like our important holidays are being acknowledged as much here, compared to other holidays. Like, our New Year, or our Autumn Festival,[[3]](#footnote-3) I don’t think many people seem to care. So, I think that’s why our attitude is like, we’re like – “yeah, whatever” to other cultures, or not willing to go out there and learn about other involvement. Like during our Autumn Festival, you know, no one really talks about it. The school doesn’t really bring it up. But on certain other holidays, I notice the front page of the school newspaper – I think a lot of those little things makes us – maybe makes some of us feel that you know, ‘why be so involved’?”*

**From: White Student Focus Group:**

The White students value diversity. They articulate a “color-blind” racial position that translates for them into social justice perspective. Similar to the Vietnamese students, the White students did not see themselves as having a place at the diversity table at SJSU. Unlike Vietnamese students, however, had no examples of white culture to offer that they felt were worthy of celebration.

*“There is really nothing good to say about being white.”*  “…*you can’t say “I’m proud to be white.”* “…*before this* [focus group session] *I’ve never seen anything at San José State that said, , you know, like a white community type thing. Where there is an Asian community club or something like that. You can’t have a white club or something like that, it’s called, like, KKK.”*

Talking about whiteness, celebrating whiteness, or taking pride in one’s racial history is clearly off limits for (most) white people. The students know this and they understand the consequences for this type of behavior. As one of the student athletes articulated: “*There’s all kinds of clubs for different cultures and stuff, but there’s nothing-- it would be considered racist if there was a-- some kind of club just for white people. It’s just the same thing, like with our country, we have Hispanic pride or black history month, black pride. And if we had a white pride month it would be considered racist.”*

They don’t see how they can contribute to diversity *as white people*.

**Recommendations:**

I think we have a lot of work to do. Let me point out that for every issue raised in these student groups, the corresponding Focus Group reports on faculty, staff and administrators raise equally compelling examples of racism, sexism, heterosexism.

I think students are a big part of campus climate, but I think FSA are an even bigger part. The students come and go – we stay. How can we hope to pass on what we do not have, and what we have not created among ourselves. If our colleagues are experiencing and perpetrating oppression then that is where we must start.

The students are doing their work – they do it at leadership today, they are doing it in many of our classrooms. Our students are brave, they are very willing to go to the hard places with one another. We can certainly give them more, but

My main recommendation is that we create diversity education for faculty, staff, and administrators.

I urge everyone to read the FSA focus group report – which is linked to my website only at this point.

I also recommend that engagement in diversity work and diversity research be tied explicitly to the retention, tenure and promotion process – and that such work be considered as scholarly and be rewarded as such at all levels in the review process. .

Finally, my last recommendation comes from the disbanded – but continuing to meet - campus climate committee

We would like to see an office of Campus Diversity established, with a campus diversity officer and enough power, resources and staff to really coordinate and oversee the activities and efforts on campus towards making this a more inclusive university.

1. Brooks-Immel, Demerris, and Kelly, Kevin, “Policy Analysis: Supporting and Promoting the Retention and Graduation Rates of Underrepresented Minorities,” University of San Francisco. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. March 25 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The “Mid-Autumn Festival” or Tet Trung Thu is “held on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar” (Do 1999:100). See The Vietnamese Americans for a description of this holiday **Invalid source specified.**. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)