

Annual Report

2003-2004

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RELATIONS

Submitted by

Barbara B. Hamilton, Chair

Membership:

The following were members of the 2003-2004 Human Relations Committee:

Jude Nixon, Honors College
Julia Urla, Modern Languages
Elyse Cron, Counseling
Xiangqun Zeng, Chemistry
Ann Mitchell-Gielegem, Nursing
Judy Robinson, Career Services
Omar Brown, Center for Multicultural Initiatives

Meetings: The committee met twice monthly during the year. The Chair alternated Wednesdays and Thursdays for meeting times to assure that members could attend as often as possible.

Charge: This year the HR Committee was guided by two of the specific charges to the committee:

- a) "To consider total educational climate at Oakland University, and to select for its particular attention those issues that are most directly related to instances of significant under-representation of various community groups wherever they may occur in all of the academic programs of the university."
- b) "(and) to promote dialogue and otherwise heighten awareness among the larger groups of faculty, administrators, students and other university personnel about how their individual actions contribute to the environment in which learning takes place."

Goals and Methods: The committee felt that the committee's charge was clear but that carrying out that charge required first exploring the perspectives of administrators and faculty who deal most directly with OU students in order to learn their opinions about how "individual actions contribute to the environment in which learning takes place." The following individuals, including two students, met with the committee to identify issues they considered most important in helping students integrate successfully into the OU academic community.

Mary Beth Snyder, VP for Student Affairs (private meeting with Chair)
Jean Ann Miller, Director, Center for Student Activities
Gloria Sosa, Director, Center for Multicultural Activities
Laura Schartman, Director, Institutional Research
Jo Reger, Faculty advisor to Gay-Lesbian Alliance
Miya Perkins, (student leader) Association of Black Students
Roxana Zuniga, (student leader) La Fuerza

The speakers shared a dominant theme: OU has a problem with student retention. Each speaker provided an analysis of the problem; some offered potential solutions. According to **Mary Beth Snyder**, “If OU faculty had more knowledge about our students’ demographics, attitudes, ambitions, etc., and if students better understood faculty expectations about their academic performance then we might find the means to improve our overall institutional retention rate. Our office of Institutional Research has data showing that far too many of our students are ‘disengaged’ from the educational process. The OIR studies in general can be very helpful in understanding today’s student and in designing retention strategies.”
(follow-up e-mail)

Laura Schartman discussed Benchmarks from the 2002 National Survey of Student Engagement and explained how OU ranked on a number of measurements. Her research helped explain why a number of OU students are ‘disengaged,’ and therefore more likely to drop out. Schartman talked about our students’ need for more direct connection to faculty and more involvement in collaborative learning.

Jean Ann Miller identified “self-segregation” as a problem among Black and White students because OU is not perceived as having a “welcoming environment.” She has money budgeted in a “diversity fund” that might be used to support faculty-student dinners. **Miya Perkins**, ABS representative, supported Miller’s contention that OU is not, in many cases, perceived as “welcoming” to Black students. She suggested that OU hire many more Black faculty so that Black students would have more role models. **Roxana Zuniga**, La Fuerza, concurred, saying that most Latino students also feel isolated from the larger university, a situation that could be helped by hiring more Latino faculty. The committee members and students discussed the need to advocate collectively for more faculty of color.

Gloria Sosa spoke of the challenges undertaken by the Center for Multicultural Initiatives. She explained the function of the “Students First” program as a major effort to retain academically challenged students. This program brings teachers, tutors, and students together in a collaborative effort to prevent dropout. She encouraged committee members to publicize and support this program within their departments.

Prof. Jo Reger discussed the continuing problem of making gays and lesbians feel safer on campus. She discussed the role of S.A.F.E. program which involves faculty and administrators in creating “safe zones,” offices and rooms designated by decal, where

gays and lesbians can find safe haven if they are being pressured in any way. Faculty and staff can undergo training to be part of this program.

Recommendations:

1. To assist in the retention effort, the committee recommends that next year the HR committee, in cooperation with Mary Beth Snyder's office and the Office of Institutional Research, create instructional videos of two focus groups. The first group(s) will include second-year students responding informally to questions about the issues that "surprised" them as freshmen—from level of academic challenge to the quality of faculty-student interactions. They will be asked what they might have done differently if they had been more familiar with faculty expectations. The second group(s) will be comprised of faculty describing their academic expectations for freshmen. These videos will then be shown to incoming freshmen during orientation discussion sessions and to faculty during special sessions. In addition, an interactive website could be created to facilitate conversation between faculty and students about the issues that emerge in these videos. The committee feels that these videos will advance discussion between faculty and students by helping both explore gaps in their expectations for each other. Snyder may have to funds to support this effort.
2. Support efforts to bring faculty and students together. Utilize the faculty-Student dinner program, the Center for Multicultural Initiatives. Reward faculty at promotion for engaging in these service activities. Without incentive, faculty will remain on the margins rather than at the center of these important collaborative activities.
3. Collaborate the other faculty and student committees to drive the issue of hiring more faculty and administrators of color.