

University of California, San Diego

**Academic Affairs Focus Groups
for
Assessing Diversity**

November, 2005 – January, 2006

Carl P. Bergstrom, Facilitator

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Executive Summary: Key Points/Questions

- What is the true extent of the decline in people of color applying for positions and being hired?
- Some people acknowledged hearing “anecdotal comments” regarding perception of UCSD by people of color
- Many issues affect all staff, regardless of color/ethnicity
- Assessment of Departmental “welcoming atmosphere” quite positive
- Departmental pros and cons strongly driven by supervisors and managers
- Leadership is critical in promoting overall policies like Principles of Community
- Basic processes related to recruitment, screening, and hiring need to be assessed and improved
- New approaches may be necessary to reach desired populations
- Educate staff about what is currently done to promote diversity
- Working with faculty is often demanding and challenging

Methodology

Introduction & Rationale: The Academic Affairs Diversity Focus Group Committee met and outlined a plan to hold a series of meetings with Academic Affairs Staff. The purpose of these sessions was to delve deeper into staff thinking about issues identified in the following statement:

In discussions with some of our HR managers and contacts, there was anecdotal evidence that people of color may not be applying in larger numbers for positions in academic departments because of a perceived culture that those units are less than welcoming to diversity. While this perception is not borne out by the results of last year's Staff @ Work Survey, we feel the matter bears further investigation. Academic Affairs will conduct several focus groups consisting of under-represented staff in our units in an effort to better determine whether or not this perception actually exists and is inhibiting applicants.

The Academic Affairs Focus Group Committee also developed preliminary Focus Group questions and reviewed these with Carl Bergstrom, facilitator. The final draft was approved by email, and is shown in Appendix, page 14.

Selection of Participants: Bobb Barile, Director of Staff Human Resources for Academic Affairs, invited all Departments to participate in the Focus Groups (see Appendix, Page 12) in an email informing of the process. Carl contacted randomly selected staff from a list of 575 names—identified by ethnicity (see Appendix, page 13 for copy of Carl's email). Three mailings of forty (40) names resulted in fifty-one (51) positive responses (with several additional responses arriving after the cut-off date). The project goal was to conduct four focus groups with 8 – 10 people per group (a total of 32 to 40 participants). Five times and dates were offered for focus groups, and people were asked to give their preferences. One time was eliminated based upon few responses, and people were given their first or second choice.

Participants: Thirty-three (33) people eventually participated, with groups of 8, 7, 10, and 8 respectively. Sessions began with a brief overview of the focus group goal: to explore “*anecdotal evidence that people of color may not be applying in larger numbers for positions in academic departments because of a perceived culture that those units are less than welcoming to diversity.*” The “Focus Group Outline” form was reviewed (see next page) with emphasis that these items were meant to encourage and guide discussion.

Group Process: Carl explained that the session was being tape recorded to allow him to give his full attention to the discussion—as opposed to note taking. He assured members that he was the only person who knew the identity of the attendees, and he was the only person who would listen to the tapes. During the last 15 minutes, the participants were directed to the final two questions/statements: “7) Are there other issues related to this subject do you want to discuss?” and “8) Wrap-up - Where we go from here.” The session closed with the consultant thanking them for their participation.

Academic Affairs Diversity Focus Group Outline Form
November – December 2005

Background

In discussions with some of our HR managers and contacts, there was anecdotal evidence that people of color may not be applying in larger numbers for positions in academic departments because of a perceived culture that those units are less than welcoming to diversity. While this perception is not borne out by the results of last year's Staff @ Work Survey, we feel the matter bears further investigation. Academic Affairs will conduct several focus groups consisting of under-represented staff in our units in an effort to better determine whether or not this perception actually exists and is inhibiting applicants.

Focus Group Questions/Outline for Focus Group

- 1) Introductory: Name, position, time at UCSD
- 2) Review Background; logistics for meeting
- 3) In what ways do the following exhibit a positive, welcoming atmosphere to diversity; or a negative atmosphere?
 - a) The University
 - b) The Faculty
 - c) My Department & my manager
 - d) My Department & our staff
- 4) What do you think is the biggest barrier or gap to having more people of color apply for positions in academic departments?
- 5) How can we overcome this gap or barrier?
- 6) What else can we do to improve the environment and foster the idea of the value of diversity—e.g., recruitment and hiring efforts?
- 7) Are there other issues related to this subject do you want to discuss?
- 8) Wrap-up: Where we go from here

Responses

Introduction

The Focus Group Outline Form (previous page) is used on the next several pages as headings for the write-up of responses. All groups were tape recorded to allow the facilitator to focus on the process and content of the group's discussion. The facilitator listened to the tapes, capturing the comments' essence—but did not necessarily transcribe all verbatim. The goal of this report is to capture the discussion of the groups, and is presented as categories of responses to the discussion questions. Generally the groups worked very well, with active exchange and limited need for prompting or questioning by the facilitator.

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- 2) Review Background; logistics for meeting

In discussions with some of our HR managers and contacts, there was anecdotal evidence that people of color may not be applying in larger numbers for positions in academic departments because of a perceived culture that those units are less than welcoming to diversity. While this perception is not borne out by the results of last year's Staff @ Work Survey, we feel the matter bears further investigation. Academic Affairs will conduct several focus groups consisting of under-represented staff in our units in an effort to better determine whether or not this perception actually exists and is inhibiting applicants.

- 3) In what ways do the following exhibit a positive, welcoming atmosphere to diversity; or a negative atmosphere?
 - a) The University
 - b) The Faculty
 - c) My Department & my manager
 - d) My Department & our staff

Discussion about sub points under Question 3) were generally divided between a) b), which dealt with more general observations; and c) d), which directed participants toward specific observations in the work area.

a) b) Responses ("The University; The Faculty")

Questions re this Process: One group in particular asked numerous questions about this process, such as the following:

- what were the actual, comparative statistics which showed the University was not employing the best mix of ethnic groups;
- why use a focus group as opposed to an anonymous questionnaire; and
- what specific groups are we focusing on in these sessions.

Every group is different, and the interest may have come from one or two people with strong interests in statistics. Additionally, the questions may be because the group doesn't see the problem, i.e., people of color not applying at UCSD. This seemed to be the case, since the questions came up several times throughout this group's session.

Negative/Positive/Neutral: Several comments were made about the University's negative atmosphere—felt or observed by participants. In analyzing these comments, it is important to remember reader bias: what may seem insignificant to the reader may be very important to someone who has experienced specific prejudice because of his/her race/ethnicity (“I was born in San Diego, 2nd generation American, and I've been stopped by the Border Patrol and asked for my papers because of my physical attributes.”); and could very well contribute to the anecdotal concerns cited in the above background statement. The people who spoke out about the negative atmosphere seemed to be the more verbal members of the groups. Hence, just listing number of comments could skew the observed nature of the group discussion. Some of the negative examples given focused on Proposition 209 and Affirmative Action (“The University hasn't done anything to replace Affirmative Action.” And “The Regents were behind Prop 209.”). Other comments seemed based upon individual experiences (e.g., “A white person became a black person's supervisor, even though they were both hired at the same time.”); and when asked about this, the person said these kinds of experiences were spread by word of mouth.

When some of the less vocal participants were encouraged to share, their experiences and observations tended to be more neutral, or positive in assessing the atmosphere. Positive comments focused on such things like (“The University is thought of as being diverse—freedom of expression and opinion—and I think most of us try to have an attitude of diversity.”) The neutral comments offered both +/- opinions, example: “The University tries to paint a picture of diversity with ads on shuttles and in newspapers, but walking through campus you don't really see it.” Also, some of these comments began to look at reasons for the public's lack of awareness about the University's diversity (“There are very diverse, cultural events that the general population never hears about.”).

Communication: All groups discussed the subject of how the University communicates with the outside world, particularly with people of color. This ranged from general perceptions people have about UCSD (“I've worked here 16 years and people still think I work for SDSU” and “People in my neighborhood tend to think of La Jolla as an elite place, somewhere foreign to them.”); to specific recommendations to reach out to people of color (“Who do people of color network with, and are we part of that network?” and “the University may have to go to unconventional venues, like street fairs, churches, and community parks to reach some people.”). People challenged the University: “you can't just put a float in the Gay Pride Parade” and “you can't just advertise on the Library Walk.” They emphasized being creative, committed, and consistent—despite ups and downs in budget cycles: “diversity has to be a priority.”

Processes: The focus groups discussed UCSD processes that may work against people of color; and noted that many of their points applied to all people applying¹ at the University. Some issues addressed included job descriptions that seemed overwhelming; not knowing key words to use; having an inside contact; the tendency to hire from within, both from staff and student pool; and the lengthy process of hiring.

Faculty: Generally, the groups identified numerous challenges in working with faculty, but also concluded the concerns were not unique to people of color. The relationships with faculty were often characterized as unsatisfactory in communication—or lack thereof; superior attitudes on the part of faculty; lack of faculty management skills or management training; some cultural differences; and the “educational divide.” A few people described experiencing more teamwork with their faculty members (some of this was in research settings, and some at other Universities).

c) d) Responses (“My Department & my manager; My Department and our staff”)

Negative/Positive/Neutral: In these areas of discussion, comments about the Departmental atmosphere categorized as negative/positive/neutral numbered 4/18/6 respectively. The negative comments included feelings of racial prejudice in promotion (“young blonde, white females were promoted before black males or black females”); and age discrimination in supervision (“I was treated like a child.”). In both negative and positive observations, the supervisor/manager’s role was critical in creating the atmosphere. In a couple of cases, people described how their manager utilized UCSD’s Principles of Community as a teaching guide, showing how issues of fairness and diversity were critical to success. Several people described environments with birthday parties, shared activities after work, and pot luck lunches; as well as very positive working relationships with a mixture of races and ethnic groups. Examples of neutral comments include “I’ve never seen specific attempts to expand or inhibit diversity; we welcome it, but I haven’t seen specific programs that encourage it.”

Leadership: People mentioned several times the importance of consistency throughout Academic Affairs in Human Resource issues, and how decentralization—although positive—could work against consistency. Examples included the use of Principles of Community; educating people about the Diversity Plan and University policies (e.g., emphasis on diversity); people “on top” knowing what happens in individual departments; and “someone in the Diversity Office walking around and talking to people.” The concern was summed up as “when the University promotes something, it needs to follow up to ensure results.”

Processes: This discussion was more focused than comments noted earlier. Participants talked about the applicant screening process, and how it was important for the manager to communicate closely with Human Resources to ensure getting the right mix of

¹ The subject of the general application of discussion points came up often, whether looking at the difficulty of getting into the University system; issues related to salaries; providing opportunities for advancement or career development; dealing with faculty; salary concerns; the time it took to complete the hiring cycle; and keeping people happy in their job once they are hired. Someone made the comment “All boats rise and fall with the tide.”

applications. The challenge is to find the right balance (“I want to see people who are qualified for our very technical jobs, so I can spend the time in the interview seeing if the applicant will be a good fit with our team” and “We may get 300 applications, and I need help screening” but not “I’ve heard of people being screened out because of an ethnic sounding surname.” Focus group members also talked about the difficulties in general of finding someone who is qualified, will work for the salary, and is still available after the hiring process is completed.

Advancement: The subject of advancement and career development came up numerous times in the groups. Group participants emphasized that if you couldn’t keep the person once hired, the entire process of striving for diversity was for naught. This subject tied into several categories already mentioned, i.e., processes, general issues, and leadership. It was specifically related to the diversity issue: several people mentioned they felt they had to “work twice as hard” to prove themselves; and that the “image of the University is minorities in lower level positions, and increasingly scarce as you go higher in the hierarchy.” In more general terms, discussion centered on limited advancement opportunities unless a new hire received additional training. Some managers are willing to help staff advance, by encouraging additional training, and being willing to let go of a good employee to help his/her career growth. Basic structural features of the University also have an impact (position descriptions and categorizations; unions; and HR practices).

Hiring Work Flow: The subject of the process or work flow in attracting, hiring, and retaining people of color came up numerous times in the groups. The model of this discussion is shown below:



The 1st and 2nd activities, “Communication” and “Early Intervention” are identified as critical to efforts to hire more people of color. “Communication” may take many forms such as efforts to raise overall awareness of UCSD, its Mission, and its valuing of diversity; communication also continues throughout all the phases. “Early Intervention” is described as helping identified populations (as early as high school—or even middle school) become prepared for working in a University setting. “Recruitment” involves creative strategies, such as reaching out in unconventional settings like street fairs, churches, and neighborhood gatherings. And “Hiring” includes approaches that make the process more user friendly, i.e., training on how to discover openings, how to write a winning application/resume with key words, and outreach offices. Finally, “Retention” means career development, mentoring, and advancement—as noted earlier.

- 4) What do you think is the biggest barrier or gap to having more people of color apply for positions in academic departments?

Introduction: In a focus group, it is important to strike a balance between letting the conversation flow between members, and not allowing it to get too far off course. As a result, much of the barriers/gaps’ identification came up throughout the session.

However, participants were asked to consider this again with Question 4) and coached with some reminders of discussion to that point.

Responses: A frequent question from participants (in various forms) was “What is the right or desired staff diversity mix for UCSD?” Should it mirror San Diego County? Should it mirror our students (this triggered several comments about the student group being a pool of potential employees, and hence a major factor in diversity make-up)? How is this affected by a dearth of minority/ethnic groups in certain professions (e.g., Blacks and Hispanics in Computer Sciences)?

Can a commitment to staff diversity compete with limited resources, oscillating budgets, non-competitive salaries, and shifting priorities? Participants agreed this question is critical if the University pursues a proactive approach as outlined in the previous section under “Hiring Work Flow.”

5) How can we overcome this gap or barrier?

Responses: Like Question 4), this question had been addressed throughout the session. Points reemphasized or added included the “Hiring Work Flow” with the various proactive efforts like creative communication and recruitment; working closely with Human Resources to ensure desired applicants were not inadvertently screened out; asking ourselves (one group actually did this during the session) “would I encourage someone to apply at UCSD” (why, why not) and make an individual commitment to use my position to help someone get through the process of application and hiring (“I’ve told people ‘send me your resume and I will look it over’ and this works.”)

6) What else can we do to improve the environment and foster the idea of the value of diversity—e.g., recruitment and hiring efforts?

Responses: In addition to “recruitment and hiring” the groups intuitively added “retention” as discussed earlier. Much of the discussion gravitated to issues and concerns that affected any/all applicants for employment; and the facilitator would probe and ask about specific impact on people of color; often a group member would recognize the general nature of the discussion and remark on this point. The consensus seemed to be that the basic hiring process needed to be examined/improved; but also new approaches needed to be added to the process to ensure the wealth of diversity desired.

7) Are there other issues related to this subject do you want to discuss?

Responses to Question 7) were moved to their respective places throughout this document.

8) Wrap-up- Where we go from here

Participants were told that the next part of the process involves reviewing the taped discussions, looking for common threads, and writing the Focus Group Report. Participant comments and observations will result in report recommendations; the Report merely arranges and edits comments/responses to ensure readability and to highlight participants' discussion. The Focus Group Report is presented to the HR Advisory Meeting and the Assistant Dean's Meeting. As appropriate, the Focus Group input will be included in overall diversity plan. When people asked if they would see the final version of this report, they were told this will be referred to Bobb Barile. All participants were thanked for their participation in the Diversity Focus Group process.

Appendix

Bobb Barile email to Departments

As part of the implementation of its Staff Diversity Plan, Academic Affairs will be conducting a series of focus groups the week after Thanksgiving. These focus groups came about as a result of discussions with some of our HR managers and contacts, where anecdotal evidence was presented indicating that people of color may not be applying in larger numbers for positions in Academic Affairs because of a perceived culture that our units are less welcoming to diversity than others on campus. While this perception was not borne out by the results of last year's Staff@Work Survey, we felt the matter warranted further investigation. Academic Affairs will conduct these focus groups (consisting of staff from underrepresented ethnic groups in our units) in an effort to better determine whether or not this perception actually exists and is inhibiting applicants; and if so, what may be done to change it.

To protect confidentiality and encourage complete candor, we are asking an outside facilitator – Carl Bergstrom – to coordinate the invitations and facilitate the sessions. Carl is an experienced consultant who has conducted focus groups at UCSD before – he came highly recommended to us because of his group-dynamic emphasis and ability to build trust in groups. We felt this was important due to the somewhat sensitive nature of this subject.

Carl has been provided with a confidential list of names and email addresses of staff members in Academic Affairs who have self-identified themselves as non-Caucasian. In the next few days Business Officers will receive a hard copy letter including the names of the individual(s) from their units on this list (we only included those for whom we have email addresses). Carl will be contacting a random set of these staff members to invite them to attend one of the sessions. The randomly selected staff will receive an email invitation from Carl with the subject line “Diversity Focus Group.” They will be directed to respond back to Carl if interested in participating, no one from UCSD will be involved in the selection process.

Each session will last approximately 90 minutes, refreshments will be provided. Our goal is to have four sessions of 8-10 participants. After all sessions are completed, Carl will summarize his findings and make a presentation at an Assistant Dean's meeting and HR Advisory Group meeting. Confidentiality of participants' individual comments at the session will be protected by Carl .

While no further action is required on your part at this time, you may wish to make staff members aware that they may be receiving an email and not to delete it out of hand as SPAM. You may also wish to encourage selected staff members to participate if invited.

We appreciate you and your managers' support in allowing staff to participate in a focus group if invited to do so.

Thank you for your assistance with this process. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Bobb Barile, Director, Staff HR Policy, Management & Analysis

Carl Bergstrom email to randomly selected names

Please allow me to introduce myself: my name is Carl Bergstrom, and I am an independent Organizational Development Consultant. I have worked on various projects at UCSD for over 14 years. Your name has been randomly selected from a subset of Academic Affairs' employees, and we are requesting that you participate in a focus group. The title of the project is Academic Affairs Diversity Focus Group. Please scroll down to see Bobb Barile's email to Academic Affairs' Managers about this project.

I want to emphasize a couple of points:

- Your name has been randomly selected from the list Bobb furnished.
- Your identity as a participant will only be known by me.
- Your comments will be confidential: my report will be a summary of the discussion; and individual comments will not be identified
- Each session will last approximately 90 minutes, refreshments will be provided.
- Sessions will be held at the Eucalyptus Point Room (formerly La Casa); building 391 in the map below.

<http://maps.ucsd.edu/Viewer.htm?Zoom=6&Pan=Once&Map=Artwork&R.x=0.440000&Cmnd=Mgfy&R.y=0.399116&View=Medium&Fill=400&Lkey=122>

Please respond to the following:

- I will participate in the Diversity Focus Group ___ Yes ___ No
- My preferred times are indicated below: 1 = first choice; 2 = second choice; 3 = third choice (note: I will do my best to accommodate your first choice; we are only holding 4 sessions, so the one with the least requests will be dropped)

___ Wednesday, November 30th, 8:30 - 10:00am

___ Wednesday, November 30th, 11:30am-1:00pm

___ Thursday, December 1st, 4:30 – 6:00 pm

___ Friday, December 2nd, 8:30am – 10:00pm

___ Friday, December 2nd, 11:30am - 1:00pm

Please address any questions to me by email or using the contact numbers below. Thank-you!

I look forward to working with you—

Carl

Carl P. Bergstrom
Magus Consulting Services
5663 Balboa Ave., Suite 406
San Diego, CA 92111-2705
858.292.4423 - Voice
619.990.1575 - Cell
858.278.4564 - Fax