

## **The State of St. Cloud State University's Campus Climate**

Three hundred thirty-eight (338) respondents contributed remarks about the state of diversity at the St. Cloud State University (SCSU), its perceived strengths and weaknesses and potential solutions, and about the survey itself. Individuals generally were divided among whether attention to diversity and climate issues was a positive or negative aspect of the University atmosphere. Several respondents reported that the general University community has an understanding of gender and race/ethnicity issues. Many others indicated they had experienced or witnessed bias based on race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, English-speaking ability, or religious beliefs; they also noted a lack of amenities for persons with disabilities. These and other individuals suggested SCSU's campus would benefit from an array of actions to promote diversity and understanding. For instance, a Caucasian, male faculty member commented, "I feel that the students, staff and faculty are generally caring and accepting of others. There have been genuine attempts by the administration to become both more diverse in terms of faculty members and more aware and accepting of people of diverse backgrounds. This can be a slow process and progress is sometimes hard to see and measure. There is still a long ways to go and these issues will continue to challenge both the SCSU community."

Several respondents praised the University for its efforts to create a diverse, welcoming atmosphere and asserted that the campus climate has improved in recent years. In contrast, some respondents reported that the administration has responded inadequately to reports of harassment or discrimination, has often fallen short of self-established diversity and inclusiveness goals, and has neglected to include students in discussions and development of policies concerning diversity. One respondent revealed her perceptions of the discrimination existing on SCSU's campus, "As with many large bureaucratic organizations, there are informal groups with tremendous power. Unfortunately, this power base at SCSU frequently resides with long-term employees who tend to be white and Christian... The discrimination that exists is not based on the criteria you have given in this survey but simply in-groups and out-groups - who likes who and on entrenched network of power."

Those respondents in favor of a multicultural campus generally did not criticize the University's diversity policies as much as they lamented the alleged lack of commitment and follow through. One lesbian faculty member stated, "I don't believe SCSU is any worse on diversity issues than any other university/college and it is better than many. I believe SCSU [is] worse than most in its ability to process complaints appropriately, efficiently and effectively. There is poor understanding of laws, policing and procedures that are in place, little consistency in their application and little confidence in their effectiveness. "

Several individuals were critical about perceived "affirmative action" or "preferential" employee hiring and student admissions; they indicated that many minority employees and students were not qualified for their positions. For example, two different respondents wrote, "I sense there has been issues of 'reverse discrimination' in hiring staff, faculty, and administrators. Not always does the best qualified secure the position I support affirmative action per se but have seen it abused at S.C.S.U (particularly in administration selections);" and "I also wonder if we are hiring the 'most qualified' people. It seems we are so concerned with diversity, that the most qualified candidates are overlooked." A male undergraduate student commented, "I was made aware of a sexual harassment case, the results of which entitle the female professors to receive higher pay based solely on their sex. I heard of this through one of the professors in the math department."

Several respondents suggested that few, if any, problems existed within the University community. Some of those respondents further suggested that "minority groups" fabricated tales of discrimination and harassment. An African American/Black faculty member commented, "I feel that the University is doing an excellent job to make it welcoming and accommodating to everyone. However, I feel that many minority groups have used the effort to discriminate against white male heterosexuals. It is not fair to put white people on the defensive." A Caucasian faculty member agreed, "Unfortunately I think there are a few of my colleagues that have been mistreated. I also think that a

greater number of my colleagues have taken advantage of the few legitimate cases and have ridden the discrimination band wagon to their own advantages." Another White male faculty concurred, "The problems on our campus do not just apply to those considered to be 'underrepresented.' Males and white faculty have also been treated unfairly, and in some cases falsely accused. There is a problem on this campus (as elsewhere in this world) with certain people claiming discrimination when things have not gone their way."

On the contrary, many respondents noted that the University has been less welcoming for underrepresented groups than for the majority population. A Latina undergraduate student commented, "I felt welcomed to a point while attending SCSU, but only from people of my race or ethnicity. I felt very uncomfortable with the Caucasian/white race, even in cases with my roommate in the residential halls." Another student of color noted, "I think the campus as a whole is not hostile to minorities. It's just that every now and then you feel the resentment of some staff members. I have experienced going into an office with a smile hoping to be given the service I came for when I meet with a resentful look in the eyes of staff member. One can't help but feel unwanted because of the background or the color of one's skin." Respondents reported covert and institutionalized racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Wrote one Caucasian administrator, "My experience is also that some discrimination or differential treatment is more subtle. I still see certain people marginalized, see the roll of the eyes, see men talking more than women in meetings, see people getting so defensive when a 'race' issue surfaces in a meeting." Many individuals shared other examples of racist, sexist, and anti-gay experiences on the campus.

Several staff members reported a "classist" divide between faculty and staff, where staff members were thought of as second-class citizens. For example, a staff member wrote, "There are faculty that call and are very rude, demanding, patronizing, and unprofessional. I was yelled at for three minutes before being hung up on. I went to my supervisor and so forth and things were somewhat settled. I think you need to address how faculty address staff members."

In regard to disability services, one male faculty member reported, "SCSU was an island of compassion and professionalism when I applied for work as a disabled person with an 'invisible chronic illness.' ... I am treated as an 'equal' regardless of my limitations. ... SCSU is clearly the best in terms of disability and compassion." Many more respondents reported a dearth of services and access for students and employees with disabilities. Furthermore, respondents acknowledged the stigma and societal reactions to physical and psychological disability. "I am a female student who has ... a special permit for Disability parking. Disability parking is nearly impossible to find spots open. I usually have to drive around for 10-15 minutes to find a spot and it's never by my building. Also, since my disability is not visible to others, many staff and faculty give me dirty looks when I park there with my pass. I have had faculty write my license plate number down to 'double check' if it's legitimate I have never once received a bad look from a student only from faculty." One individual described her experiences living with psychological disabilities, stating, "I have... depression and OCD [Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder]. My friend who is manic and I feel that there is not too many places on campus where people are educated and accepting of mentally ill people. I have been called 'psycho' in the past and have had rumors about me since I am mentally ill, these people of course didn't even understand that OCD is an anxiety disorder and not a psychotic disorder. People are not educated or accepting of people with mental illness. And being a person with a mental illness can at times be hard and lonely."

The University's student body was frequently characterized as a homogenous majority composed of White, middle-class Christians. A few individuals commented on student organizations and services. One undergraduate student wrote, "There is a lot of student Associations divided according to continents or countries. This is very good but we should have organizations that represent the campus as a whole." A Caucasian female faculty advocated for the "removal of Student Government's ability to fund various campus student organizations with student activities fees. Defunding racial/ethnic groups is virtually impossible because of student's cries of racism; however, these groups receive a disproportionate amount of funds already, in possible violation of Univ. of

Wisconsin v. Southworth. I'd propose a committee *of* administrators, faculty and students to consider funding requests."

Several respondents reported sexual harassment and/or gender bias in hiring, promotion, or in classroom settings on campus, though according to one respondent, "The university is more accepting of white women more so than women of colour, especially African-American." One faculty member wrote, "Last year I watched a dean and a faculty member drive a woman from a department, then this fall they hired a man from the same country as the Dean and the other faculty member. The search was done much faster than most." She further alleged, "One member *of* our department, who has since retired, used to make comments about how menopause was affecting my attitude!" In addition to experiences of discrimination and harassment, respondents reported a disparity in pay among equally qualified men and women where men have higher salaries than women. At least one faculty witnessed (and reported) some male students making "inappropriate sexual advances" toward women students. Women employees and students indicated that they feared for their safety in certain areas on campus and in the darkness of night. Echoing others, one respondent was "also displeased with the lack of female professors and mentors on campus."

Also in regard to sexism, a few respondents indicated that men have been the targets of discrimination. One male faculty said, "in 10 years in the campus community and in St. Cloud neither my wife nor I have ever witnessed any racial or sexual discrimination directed against a minority or a woman. The only such discrimination I have observed has been directed against white males at SCSU." Another reported, "I have observed discriminatory hiring that favors persons *of* color, women and certain ethnic groups, to the detriment *of* white males. I believe these practices are immoral and illegal, clearly violating equal opportunity for all people regardless *of* race or sex. Measures have been taken to give minorities special consideration in the hiring process, and at least one individual has been hired at a significantly higher salary because she is a woman and non-white. This is not speculation - I was told this by the dean *of* my college..."

Interestingly, little mention was made of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) persons or issues. One gay faculty member indicated, "Historically, I have known of faculty being dismissed because of sexual orientation, but the university has made significant progress in these issues." Another faculty member wrote, "I have seen the climate for women, non-whites, GLBT people, disabled, etc., improve dramatically since 1979 since I arrived. At the same time, as a lesbian, to this day I am not comfortable coming out in class because of student attitudes I have heard, observed and been targeted by." An undergraduate student described disconcerting incidents: "As for my experiences as a bisexual partner of a transgendered individual, these have been more personally threatening. I have been verbally harassed by students in the presence of my partner and separately, including by gay and lesbian students, faculty and staff unaccepting of bisexual and/or transgendered people."

Most of the commentary regarding the LGBT community, however, was written by respondents who "disapprove" of homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism. One undergraduate student insisted, "Transgender is not a biological sex! That may be how a person feels mentally, but they are usually born either male or female, not transgender! That is an after fact after the gender they are born with." Several "Christian" respondents' comments mirrored the born-again Christian student that wrote, "I do not agree with homosexuality and so I do not like having it 'waved' in my face. ...I see GLBT as doing all it can to make everyone aware and accepting all the time and that bothers me...tone it down."

Several people expressed their opinions about religion. Although they are in the majority on campus, some Christians (most notably, "Born Again" Christians) felt oppressed. "I feel as a white Christian, that my rights have been taken away to celebrate what I believe in. I can't even say Merry Christmas, Happy Easter, God Bless You...etc...What's going on?" Non-Christians also were dismayed about the religious climate. "The religious climate on this campus is NOT welcoming. The Christian atmosphere is TOO overwhelming while other religions seem to get little or no support and seem to be not encouraged to show themselves. As a Buddhist, I feel there is no room or consideration

for my religion on this campus." Although not a solution to underlying tension, the following statement offered, "people have to look at geography, we are in central Minnesota the major population of the area is white Christian people. Christian ideals, values, morals and traditions are embraced here. You have to realize that."

A few individuals commented about the ramifications of the September 11<sup>th</sup> events. Like others, an undergraduate student showed concern about anti-Muslim and anti-Middle Eastern sentiment. She wrote, "It was not until [September 11<sup>th</sup>] that I realized how truly mean people on this campus can be and how indifferent some faculty remain. The fact that some professors refused to talk about the event and all the issues that went along with it was disheartening. Some showed no interest in communication. Students seemed to close themselves off from anyone remotely resembling a Middle Eastern person. It seems that many people haven't opened themselves up still, almost 7 months later."

Another respondent described a reaction vastly different from the others, stating, "I have feared for my safety as a white male before. Especially after September 11, and my open support for Israel recently, some Islamic groups have made me feel this way."

Quite a few individuals noted that non-native English speakers experience difficulties and discrimination. One person indicated, "English is my second language and ... you should notice that students from foreign countries have lots of difficulties because of language." Respondents were harassed, mocked, and ignored by staff and faculty because of their accents or lack of fluency in English. Another person wrote, "As an international student, English is my second language. However, it doesn't mean that all students with foreign language speak lousy English. Some of my professors felt bad picking at international students to answer random questions in class. This is very discouraging for us. In my opinion, professors should give the chance for us to speak up in class." Several respondents complained about faculty who have difficulty speaking English; for example, "Faculty should speak good English before SCSU hires them so that students have a fair chance as others that take the same class from an instructor that does speak good English."

Lastly, several respondents purported a distinct opposition to the ideology of diversity, claiming that its attention to difference and its minoritizing view only succeed in exacerbating tension, producing backlash, and creating division. One such person was "We have no need to tally 'underrepresented' groups. Lumping individuals into gender, orientation, racial and other groups does a disservice too everyone. . . . You may just as well group people by the colors they wear (or don't wear). Grouping in this manner perpetuates all the stereotypes which get in the way of an individual's development and growth. It separates us."

### **Improving the Campus Climate**

Solutions of varying degree and type were presented within respondents' comments, ranging from top-down intervention to individuals educating themselves about inclusiveness on campus. Conversely, a few advanced no suggestions and instead stated that there is no need to find solutions to problems that do not exist. These individuals believed that SCSU adequately addresses climate and diversity issues, or that it is not the University's responsibility to do so in the first place.

Classroom solutions were among the most popular, with required courses (and workshops for employees) dealing with other cultures, diversity, and race frequently mentioned. One staff member wrote, "I wish everyone could be open and go into such training with a positive attitude, but many don't. I learned a great deal taking HURL classes on racism, sexism, etc. that I feel were invaluable and wish others would take advantage of those kinds of opportunities. As a white, straight, Christian person, I did not have a clue about oppression until I allowed myself to be educated about it." Many respondents contested the institution of a mandatory class - as the requirement may breed resentment among individuals - and suggested instead that the University give professors incentives to integrate diversity into existing paradigms.



Others questioned the potential of classroom interventions to effectively educate about and improve the campus climate. While some individuals criticized professors for being ethnocentric, classist, or sexist, the consensus on academia focused its power on learning about other cultures and sharing experiences with fellow students, especially about their own backgrounds or places of origin. Political correctness was seen as discouraging those who might express views different from those of the professor or of the information being presented. Also, while certain "diversity" curricula were praised, they were also criticized for their inaction in helping students think outside their own race and class biases in order to understand the experiences of individuals of other groups.

Several people suggested the University develop student affairs programs, bring in speakers, and conduct seminars at which attendance is voluntary to help all members of the University understand diversity issues. One respondent proposed, "To succeed in diversity issues, I believe that there need to be ample, out-of-classroom options for people of diverse backgrounds to mix. The problem in central MN appears to be that folks are in class to learn of diversity, then go 'home' to their traditional families which often exclude diverse groups."

Specific classes were suggested for non-native English speakers so that they might communicate more comfortably with roommates and classmates. In addition, the same possibility was proposed for anyone working or dealing with non-native speakers.

Proposals for solutions involving administrative intervention resoundingly asked for more visible and vocal leadership on diversity issues, particularly on the part of the president and the upper administration. A few administrative offices were cited as needing to become more responsive, supportive, and user-friendly. Respondents wanted "to see more resources dedicated to improving services and accessibility for disabled persons. Critical policy changes instituting a zero tolerance for perpetrators of discrimination or violence were suggested. A few respondents thought that the policies

were already in place, but that the University climate would improve if "the positive events of campus [were] publicized (especially off campus) to a much greater extent"

Some respondents cited the importance of increasing the recruitment and retention of administrators, faculty, and staff from underrepresented groups. Many suggested that the University should also focus much more attention on recruiting and retaining a diverse student population.

Finally, the most general of solutions advocated involved raising individual consciousness and how the campus community could benefit from increased attention to and education on certain values and groups. First, and foremost, "diversity" as an idea and in practice would need to be reviewed and re-understood to prevent further tokenism and lip service. Respect, individuality, interaction, and appreciation for all should be promoted as much and as often as possible. In terms of categorical awareness, attention to physical and psychological disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, the perception and treatment of women, minority and bi-racial/multiracial students, and empathy with - not condemnation of - heterosexual, white men needs to be integrated into a broader appreciation for diversity. Commonality and the celebration of similarities should be presented alongside consideration of difference.