

Fresh Perspectives:
Diversity and Inclusion Training for Student Organizations in a College of Agriculture

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Introduction/Need for Idea

Student diversity in institutions of higher education continues to increase (Beimers, Warner, & Mackie, 2013; Enyeart Smith, Wessel, & Polacek, 2017; Seidman, 2005). However, the level of inclusion and sense of belonging perceived by underrepresented groups is uneven (Drape, Anderson, Church, Jain, Slabach, & Amaral, 2017; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon, & Longerbeam, 2007; Sanchez, DeFlorio, Wiest, & Oikonomidoy, 2018). Drape et al. (2017) called for colleges of agriculture to intentionally prepare their students to learn and work with a culturally diverse population. Consequences of such targeted work are improvement in the overall campus climate and a student body with a better understanding of self in relation to the grander campus community (Hurtado, 1992; Kuk & Banning, 2010).

Diversity is an ever-present concern on university campuses. Cal Poly and the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences (CAFES) experienced a series of racially charged events in the spring of 2018. It is believed these events impacted the fall 2018 enrollment of accepted underrepresented students and damaged the institution's reputation. While measures were taken to address diversity and inclusion through coursework and university-wide speaking events, the Agricultural Education and Communication (AEC) Department elected to develop curriculum to be shared monthly in college student organization meetings for the 2018-2019 academic year. *Fresh Perspectives (FP)* was developed to empower CAFES club members with the tools and dispositions necessary to begin and guide conversations surrounding diversity and inclusion, from a place of respect and understanding.

How it Works

A leadership team comprised of an AEC Department faculty member and three students with training experience produced a series of nine, fifteen-minute instructional modules suitable for adoption in monthly CAFES affiliated club meetings. Module topics were developed based on student feedback received from spring 2018 campus debrief forums. The curriculum series falls into a continuum of three themes, containing the following titles (in italics) and objectives.

1. Communication: (a) *Developing and Delivering Key Messages* - Synthesize and deliver key messages using a model structure, (b) *Communicating the Brand* - Explore ways to model brand expectations through interactions with others, and (c) *Communicating Through Adversity* - Apply techniques for communicating effectively in challenging/stressful situations.
2. Relationship Building: (a) *Engaging in Conversation* - Implement strategies to initiate, engage in, and close a conversation, (b) *Respecting Diversity* - Demonstrate actions which model respect for diverse groups and ideas, and (c) *Constituency Building* - Create a constituency building plan to develop relationships with those outside the organization.
3. Influence: (a) *Understanding Influence* - Explore the core tenants of leadership and use them to craft a personal mission to positively and purposefully influence others, (b) *Planning for Change* - Utilize the principles of planned change to cultivate a plan for organizational change, and (c) *Servant Leadership* - Examine the principles of servant leadership within the context of the campus dynamic.

The *FP* Leadership Team presented a new module to representatives of the 21 clubs and organizations recognized by the CAFES Student Council at each monthly Council meeting, in a train-the-trainer experience. Club representatives then presented the module to their respective club members at their monthly meetings.

Results to Date/Implications

As of February 25, 2019, five modules were presented to the CAFES Student Council. Because club representatives unknowingly had *FP* added to their responsibilities when they returned to campus in fall 2018, the *FP* Leadership Team wanted to solicit their feedback through a Google Form instrument distributed through campus email. 67% of club reps reported they completed three or more of the modules received and all respondents shared the modules took no more than 15 minutes to complete. When asked how their club members felt about *FP*, 17% stated *positive* while 83% stated *acceptable*. Reasons for finding the modules *positive* include: high member engagement and greater personal familiarity with the topics. For those perceiving the member time as *acceptable*, the disconnect between the *FP* content and their club's purpose made the trainings awkward. They also cited it was challenging to get the members to engage. When asked about the level of support their other club officers gave to *FP*, 83% felt they were *very supportive* and demonstrated this support by discussing it at officer meetings, assisting in the presentation of modules, and critically reflecting on club operations in response to the modules. Regarding how the training role affected club representatives, survey participants cited personal growth in several areas including: leadership, presentation skills, verbal communication, and personal confidence. To date, the club representatives' key take-aways are: understanding it is necessary to voice concerns, interaction with those who are different is important, and taking the time to discuss these issues has helped them learn more about themselves and others.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

FP was created and facilitated in response to the challenging events Cal Poly experienced related to diversity and inclusion in the 2017-2018 academic year. These events prompted quick reflection to identify practical ways to help the CAFES student body develop the skills and dispositions to work and learn in harmony with others (Drape et al., 2017). *FP* was a way to contribute to a multi-faceted approach to educating students in the classroom, through larger campus events, and through student organizations. Based on program feedback, the *FP* Leadership Team plans to present an additional facilitation session at a CAFES Student Council meeting to help club representatives feel more confident and competent with presenting future modules. Additionally, the Leadership Team will review and revise the curriculum. One participant recommended offering *FP* as a quarterly workshop series, to bring all CAFES club members together for training and exploration with the larger college community.

Costs/Resources Needed

FP is possible due to the commitment of passionate faculty and students and the support of the college community. Each member of the Leadership Team volunteered their time. There were no financial costs associated with the program. However, should the workshop series be pursued in the future, costs associated with incentivizing students to attend an additional training event (ie. food, venue, sound equipment, etc.) would be incurred.

References

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