

Presidential Task Force for Opportunity and Equity Meeting Minutes 10/29/2020

General Ronald Burgess:

Called the meeting to order by thanking all members for attending. He proceeded to ask what everybody thought about the [article](#) that Ms. Elizabeth Devore shared with the group.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Apologized for joining the meeting late and added that she had several thoughts about the article but would not comment first.

Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley:

Apologized for not having an opportunity to review the article as she was in the middle of midterms for her classes, but noted that she will be sure to read the article by the end of the week.

Dr. Oladiran Fasina:

Commented that he was not shocked about what was described in the article, he noted that this was a shared experience of all Black faculty on a daily basis regardless of what ranks they may be in. He added that it differs on various levels from fighting for positions, funding, facing microaggressions, etc.

Dr. Taffye Clayton:

Commented on how the article was really nuanced; there were multiple fascists to the article. In a nutshell, it showered that there are things being done on campuses across the nation that address what continues to be an institutional challenge. With respect to being able to attract diverse faculty – particularly, African American Faculty and to be able to retain them, cultivate healthy climates, and be able to allow all faculty but specifically African American faculty and other diverse faculty to flourish. Dr. Clayton went on to note that it is continuous work that takes an institutional investment of time and resources, and then when doing well at it, this attracts external dollars too because other stakeholders want to invest in their own ways. Dr. Clayton added that this article provided an insight into the opportunities at Auburn University; there are things that are being done but always more we can do.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Concurred with Dr. Clayton's statement. She noted how some areas of the article discussed the feasibility of having centers and institutes. She added that 99% of the article resonated with her but the only part to be careful of is not to give the impression that this is a burden for Black faculty. Dr. Russell added that she has had colleagues say that to her before and she has been insulted because it is not extra work; this is her work and what they are there for. She went on to add that the key is that everyone wants to be acknowledged, recognized, respected, and compensated accordingly for their work. She added that it is not uncommon for White counterparts in academia to be doing the same work in equity and social justice but they will

have titles (director, assistant dean) whereas Black faculty would do the same work but would not be treated the same way. She reminded everyone that this is their (Black Faculty) life work and is not too much for them; added that critical mass is important.

Dr. Oladiran Fasina:

Responded to Dr. Russell on how it is a different experience for STEM faculty (as well as some of the graduate students on the call) have a different experience. Dr. Fasina added how one cannot go about things by themselves, several resources are needed i.e. equipment, labs, money, assistance from graduate students. He went on to add that sometimes these graduate students sometimes do not want to work with them because the faculty is Black. He added how much of a struggle it is to do research, meet appointment requirements, teach several classes a year, complete proposals, etc., and then still feel backlash and/or animosity toward Black faculty. He added how often, they are the only Black faculty member or student in their college/school and people would not want to work with them in group work/research, etc. Dr. Fasina added how these factors affect their productivity. He added that the article brought up a point that he has continuously mentioned: the need for more increased minority (students/faculty etc.) in STEM.

Mr. Kevin Coonrod:

Added to the theme of how that is a cautionary tale to what they are doing where there would be a lot of effort, time and money put into setting something up, find the people to populate what is set up and the things get to cut loose. The support and culture that is needed are not present. Mr. Coonrod added the importance of ensuring that once the recruiting of a more diverse population occurs, there needs to be a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Agreed and added how she and Dr. Fasina are part of AGAP, which is currently working on a project for African American men (junior faculty) in STEM and investigating career advancement in the surrounding area. She added how multiple institutions have very few or no African American (and people of color) junior faculty. She noted how the article noted that the Rhode Island School of Design recently announced a hiring cluster of ten new tenure track/professors; we see it can be done so the challenge remains as to why it is not happening? Dr. Russell added how the recruiting of diverse faculty should not solely be the responsibility of the diverse faculty and staff; their White coworkers and colleagues need to be part of the change they all hope to see. She noted how this is now referred to as JETI (Justice, Equity, Training, and Inclusion).

Dr. Taffye Clayton:

Appreciated the complementary nature of what it means to have success in recruiting diverse faculty and students. There is a complementary relationship as this provides the students to be able to see themselves in the people they see most often – which would be the faculty.

Dr. Joffery Gaymon:

Added how the article reminds her of some of the similar challenges of diversifying the campus from the student perspective. She noted how in the training that the Cabinet went through, the facilitator spent a lot of time discussing how progress cannot be made without changing the pool. Dr. Gaymon added how the article spoke on the notion from a student perspective to staff and faculty that speaks to the importance of culture and the notion of continuous improvement. She added how doing a diversity initiative or hiring is a check toward progress but it is not the arrival or final destination; she noted how complex this all is.

Ms. Elizabeth Devore:

Shared about the awareness she has to make sure she is kept up to date with the work that people decide to share. She is intentional about following Black and minority students/faculty/pages on social media as these various channels provide various insights to articles and studies etc. that she would not typically find in general searches.

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Agreed with Mrs. Devore; noted that what motivated her to go into engineering was the effort that she had experienced from faculty. Ms. Strickland noted that they were intentional with their actions and feedback and it drew her into her field of study. She noted that if more faculty would put in that kind of effort, recruiting would increase for sure.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Agreed with Ms. Strickland. She mentioned that the work comes from taking responsibility and being culturally competent; Russell also added how commitment is key.

Ms. Donielle Fagan:

interjected about how it is still challenging having these types of conversations as it is sensitive. Noted the importance of the fluidity of cultural competence and the lack of it stems from a lack of commitment. Ms. Fagan went on to note that there is a multi-dimensional framework but that begins on an individual level. She continued about this individual level creates systems (and institutions) of change. She reflected on how she initiated one-on-one meetings with members of the Task Force to aid in the creation of allyship. She noted the importance of intentional interactions as many do not realize what role implicit biases play and expressed that it is why there need for a curriculum around diversity training.

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Commented how helpful Ms. Fagan's comments were. Went on to note, "if the water we swim in is diversity, then cultural competency is a necessary skill for survival and success". Dr. Clayton commented on the experiences her staff is undergoing in the planning of their events in and around election season and the challenges that have come with that. These include being in the correct frame of mind to be the kind of support system they need to be to students to do something right before the election or immediately afterward. This lead to the discussion of mental health, self-care as people are managing various levels of things they need to be aware of,

Ms. Donielle Fagan:

Continued that it is important for individuals who do not identify as people of color to hear about their experience and gain perspective on what they go through. Shared her experience during "Black Survival Week" which was hosted by the American Psychologist Association. This week occurred earlier in the year. She continued about how the White students penned a letter expressing how the Black faculty and students needed a break. So the department had two separate training sessions; one for the Black students/faculty which provided coping mechanisms etc. as well as a training session for those individuals who did not identify as Black. This training session helped those individuals identify how to be an ally. Ms. Fagan commented about how intentional the whole experience was; she highlighted how powerful the entire program was in bringing to life the sense of allyship to that level.

Mr. Kevin Coonrod:

Added how Dr. Gaymon and Ms. Devore have been speaking in various leadership groups about the work happening in the Presidential Task Force and expressed his gratitude for how well they represented the group. Mr. Coonrod added that there is a lot of interest in the work that is being done

Dr. Melody Russell:

Added to Ms. Fagan's point that she did not get to where she is by herself; it took a lot of hard work and support from many people. Dr. Russell continued with Ms. Strickland's point about the importance of having faculty (that the minority students can relate to) reaching out and putting in that extra effort for their students. She went on to add how an institution planned out an entire day dedicated to self-care/mental health (no class, no emails, etc.) that the entire institution took part in. Asked if there was an opportunity for the University to do something like that?

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Thanked General Burgess for providing the group with a space like this to engage in the article.

General Ronald Burgess:

Noted that it was Dr. Clayton's idea for this type of discussion and that Ms. Devore assisted her in gathering the information (articles etc.) Noted that what resonated with him from the article was the need for deliberateness in the work they do. He added that the bureaucracy, the institution left to its own devices generally does not do what needs to be done. General Burgess added that faculty hire faculty and that the Task Force can have some thoughts and provide the input but looking at a lot of the leadership in the meeting, they do not have much say in the hiring process. He continued to add that the challenge comes in ensuring that the voices of those in the Presidential Task Force are heard.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Respectfully pushed back on General Burgess' comment. Dr. Russell noted how it really depends on the administration as they set the tone for what the faculty do. Dr. Russell went on to add the tone and leadership changes in her department constitute how cultural shifts occur

in the unit. She added that she doesn't think it is fair to just say that it is the faculty who hire faculty. That may be the process/detail of it but before that process is even reached, there is a critical tone that must be set as to what that unit/department/institution must do to identify the strategic plan for equity and diversity. She ended by saying that regardless of the search committee's recommendations, it is the department heads and/or Deans that make the final hiring decision.

General Ronald Burgess:

Agreed with Dr. Russell on her points. Added that senior leadership needs to lead by example and set the environment, parameters, need to be saying the right things and set the tone, etc. asked for the Task Force members to assist him in working towards achieving this goal.

Dr. Oladiran Fasina:

Noted an example of what Dr. Russell mentioned in making a difference; most departments/programs do not have a diversity inclusivity statement on their website. He went on to add that numerous recruiters and applicants do not want to apply for positions that do not have an explicit diversity statement. Dr. Fasina also added that he has drafted a diversity statement but has not shared it yet as it would be better to have specific instructions to do so from the Presidential Task Force.

Ms. Donielle Fagan:

Added to Dr. Fasina's point in that this has been her current experience while she has been applying for internship sites. Ms. Fagan added that she has removed her application from institutions that do not have diversity statements.

Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg:

Added how one of the specific recommendations from her subcommittee was to include a diversity statement on Auburn University's website. She noted that a representative from HR was due to reach out to Dr. Clayton to begin formulating the language for it.

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Noted that she has not heard from HR yet but is sure she will. Dr. Clayton added how not only are the diversity statements important but the manner in which questions are asked behaviorally around diversity and inclusion for a candidate is also a component. She noted how there are some sophisticated strategies out there that help institutions gain a resulting end game. She looks forward to collaborating with HR, Biggo Center, and all the colleges and schools in developing the diversity statement.

General Ronald Burgess:

Asked Dr. Clayton to reach out to the HR representatives to inquire about the status of the project. He also wanted to bring up the discussion about the general concern surrounding the election not only in the African American community but all underrepresented groups. General Burgess has noted that he has continuously pushed to have a conversation between some of the underrepresented personnel in campus and security (lead by Kelvin King). There have been

some conversations but he noted they have not been as fulfilling as he hoped. Noted that Dr. Bobby Woodard will be meeting with those folks tomorrow as well as the civility initiative that is being spearheaded by him. Asked Dr. Clayton to inform the group about the post-election events hosted by the Office of Inclusion and Diversity (OID) and Student Affairs.

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Informed the group that there will be two events: the first is a Post-Election Brave Space to Be hosted by OID; this will occur on November 11 and is a campus engagement event that includes faculty, staff, and students to engage around what they are thinking, needs, feeling, etc. It will form an open space where people can express themselves. Dr. Clayton went on to add that as a part of that, there will be some structure to the session as there will be political science professors to offer some kind of assessment about where we are post-election and counselors on hand as well. Dr. Clayton went on to add that Student Affairs thought through a civility initiative to engage with the students about what it means to be thoughtful, engage with someone with a different opinion as to their own, perspective-taking, etc. The event will cover the basic tenants of civility and kindness as well as an aspect of courageousness around what it means to have these uncomfortable conversations as well. This was launched last night and they have a full media campaign as well.

Mr. Kevin Coonrod:

Thanked Dr. Clayton for her efforts in culture strengthening.

Dr. Joffery Gaymon:

Added that it is ok to disagree and have different opinions. She also asked General Burgess what plans are in place for what happens post-election as the Presidential Task Force does carry so much weight. She inquired about any communications similar to that of President Gogue etc.? Dr. Gaymon noted the importance of being prepared to have any form of a response strategy to anything that could happen during the election season.

General Ronald Burgess:

Asked Kelvin King and added that they do have a standing committee on campus that meets every two weeks. Burgess asked for them to be more aware during this time period and noted that they are looking to be working with Student Affairs. He added that he has also spoken to Senate leadership as well and wants to be proactive if/when they start to get any indications of events occurring.

Dr. Joffery Gaymon:

Noted that it would be best to be prepared with a draft of a statement for the case that an event or incident does take place.

Mrs. Gretchen VanValkenburg:

Inquired if General Burgess had someone on the cabinet-level in charge of strategic communications?

General Ronald Burgess:

Mentioned that there are several individuals on standby and have been working behind the scenes to think through response strategies for any events or incidents that may occur. This is to ensure that if needed, a timely response will be made.

Ms. Donielle Fagan:

Interjected and added that modeling is an intervention and that one of the concerns has been that the younger generations learn from the example that is set/bestowed on them. She went on to note how she has even experienced within the task force how individuals have different views and opinions but still converse in a civil and respectful manner.

Ms. Elizabeth Devore:

Added how there is no need to have to wait for something to happen before the University says or does something because no matter who gets elected, Toomer's Corner will be rolled. She went on to note that having the University prepare a statement would mean it is taking a political stance, but rather that it is taking a human stance.

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Agreed to some degree; Dr. Clayton noted how it is determined by what the University's desire is to do preemptive tone setting and delineated strategy. She added that some institutions are distributing communication statements about the awareness of election season and the possible actions that could unfold.

General Ronald Burgess:

Agreed with Dr. Clayton and noted how there is nothing wrong with over-communicating. He mentioned that President Gogue and Dr. Bobby Woodard have already put out their statements and asked Ms. Kim Brown to ensure the Task Force members received the links to them. General Burges noted that if the Task Force felt like a third message should be distributed, he is happy to do so.

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Supported General Burgess' point and noted the importance of what he had just said. It was important for the group to be made aware of what has already been done so far i.e. the two messages from President Gogue and Dr. Woodard. Dr. Clayton noted that these are important impact points to share across the group so they can communicate about it if asked. She agreed that it can be determined in time about sharing another statement. Added that Dr. Gaymon and Dr. Fasina asked to have the two statements added to both the University and Presidential Task Force websites.

General Ronald Burgess:

Asked Ms. Amy Weaver to ensure that President Gogue's statement is front and center of the University website.

Ms. Donielle Fagan:

Suggested there should be a change to the channels/modality of the information being distributed from the University. She referenced Coach Pearl's video about the Unity T-Shirt campaign. She added that it would be important for a statement/message to be distributed directly from the Presidential Task Force.

Dr. Oladiran Fasina:

Asked about the possibility of distributing the messages through a text system?

General Ronald Burgess:

Requested Dr. Clayton to reach out to Strategic Communications to inquire about the possibility of utilizing another modality for distributing communication.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Added that importance of the message reaching everyone in the Auburn Community. Agreed that text messages would work well in getting messages to the Auburn Community; Dr. Russell added that the message needs to be clear. There needs to be a message about what the consequences are in the case of a lack of civility and is not following the Student Handbook.

General Ronald Burgess:

Noted that he will speak to Dr. Woodard about adding Dr. Russell's points to the message if it has not already been included.

Ms. Elizabeth Devore:

Agreed with Dr. Russell's point about the use of texts as an additional means for University messaging. Ms. Devore also noted that the message should include the various resources available in terms of reporting things they have been experiencing e.g. BERT. She noted that the statement should include Dr. Russell's point about the consequences for misbehavior should be included as well as the available resources too. This could be done via the email/text that goes out. She added that states should also be placed on the home page of the website(s).

Mr. Kevin Coonrod:

Noted what the Policy of Classroom Behavior discusses and how it would be beneficial if the instructors included that in their syllabi. Mr. Coonrod noted that it becomes more challenging with professors due to academic freedom, First Amendment Rights, etc.

Dr. Taffye Benson Clayton:

Added how encouraging the faculty to be civil is not a challenge.

Mr. Kevin Coonrod:

Agreed and added how that is the cultural strengthening aspect.

General Ronald Burgess:

Wanted to ensure the group was mindful of the time and asked Dr. Russell about the progress of the Auburn University Center/Institute for Civil and Human Rights.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Dr. Russell informed the group that several of the individuals who she reached out to about being on the subcommittee have agreed to participate. She added that the subcommittee is almost complete but is still open to accepting names from individuals from the Task Force if they chose to volunteer; she reminded the group that this project will evolve over time and as it progresses, more people will be added/rotated in. Dr. Russell also added that she will wait until she has established the entire subcommittee before she has them meet the members of the Presidential Task Force, she hopes to have them join one of the meetings before the group parts for December break.

General Ronald Burgess:

Noted how well Dr. Russell is doing with the development of the subcommittee and agreed with her that it would be best to wait until the entire subcommittee is fully established before meeting with the Presidential Task Force. General Burgess also reminded the Task Force members of the meet and greet scheduled for November 10, 2020, in the Basketball Arena. He went on to ask about the group's thoughts for continuing the conversation about the recruitment and retention of African American students, staff, and faculty at Auburn. General Burgess noted how Dr. Gaymon teed up a lot of information for the Task Force to digest and that he hoped they would move forward with giving more attention to the retention aspects of the discussion. He went on to ask Dr. Gaymon to lead this conversation again and identify ways to move forward.

Dr. Joffery Gaymon

Noted that she is happy to lead this discussion and added that she felt like not enough was done on the retention side as there is still a lot of data that needs to be worked through. She added that she would like to model Dr. Russell's subcommittee and bring in some additional students to help deepen the understanding.

General Ronald Burgess:

Asked if anybody disagreed with readdressing this conversation?

Ms. Mya Strickland:

Volunteered to be part of Dr. Gaymon's subcommittee.

Ms. Elisabeth Devore:

Agreed with Dr. Gaymon's notion of the need for more student involvement and also volunteered to be part of the subcommittee/discussion. Added how several of the topics from the Graduate Student Council could be added to Dr. Gaymon's subcommittee.

General Ronald Burgess:

Asked Ms. Devore to send him some of the topics that arose from the Graduate Student Council so that they can be further discussed within the Task Force.

Mrs. Elisabeth Devore:

Noted how the topics all had something to do with retention; in regards to graduate students, it has to do with advisors, mentorships, inclusive culture, etc. – all pieces tied to the success and retention of students.

Ms. Donielle Fagan:

Also volunteered to be part of Dr. Gaymon’s subcommittee.

Dr. Melody Russell:

Had to let everybody on the call know that it was Dr. Clayton’s birthday today.

Ms. Ada Ruth Huntley:

Asked to have a brief chat with General Burges after the meeting ended and also informed the group that she is leading the charge on the Mental Health Task Force. Ms. Huntley informed the group of how there is a lack of knowledge of mental health resources on campus and will be meeting with Ms. Davidson of EVERFI to discuss the addition of a mental health and wellness training course.

General Ronald Burgess:

Added how we will not meet on Tuesday as he encouraged everybody to vote. Thanked everyone for being here today and added that he will be meeting with Dr. Russell about her presentation and plans to move forward with plans for the center/institute. The next Presidential Task Force meeting will be via zoom, Thursday, November 5 at 3:30 pm CST.

Presidential Task Force for Opportunity & Equity Members:

Ada Ruth Huntley	Amy Weaver
Angela Cannon	Bill Hardgrave
Bruce Pearl	C. Kevin Coonrod
Donielle Fagan	Elizabeth Devore
Gretchen VanValkenburg	Ja'lia Taylor
Jaime Hammer	Joffery Gaymon
Katrina Akande	Kim Brown
Lastella Paradise	Madison Birckhead
Melody Russell	Mya Strickland
Oladiran Fasina	Ronald Burgess
Ronny Isaac	Royrickers Cook
Seymour Irby	Sylvia Masango
Taffye Clayton	