

Presidential Task Force for Opportunity and Equity

April 15, 2021

Minutes

Attendees: Akilah Alwan, Mikayla Brown, Taffye Benson Clayton, Chacolby Burns-Johnson, Kevin Coonrod, Joffery Gaymon, Norman Godwin, Lady Frances Hamilton, Robin Jaffe, Kimberly Mulligan-Guy, Lastella Paradise, Jared Russell, Melody Russell, Jailin Sanders, Joellen Sefton, Giovanna Summerfield, Gretel Thornton, Gretchen VanValkenburg, Jennifer Adams, Kim Brown and Amy Weaver

- **Updates – Gen. Burgess was not able to attend the meeting. Dr. Taffye Clayton led the meeting.**
 - **Diversity Statement Approval**
 - Dr. Clayton reported that she received very good input on the diversity statement. She's worked with the tribal archivist for the Poarch Band of Creek Indians on refining the language.
 - Dr. Clayton said she would have another update on the diversity statement at the task force's next meeting, but wanted everyone to know that it is moving forward.
 - **Subcommittee Reports**
 - Reports from the Faculty Recruitment and Retention subcommittee and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Education and Training subcommittee would be forthcoming in the next few meetings. An update will be given as to where we are in the implementation of those efforts.
 - **Discussion about possibility of a Student Advocacy Center**
 - Dr. Joffery Gaymon said there may be some overlap with the student retention subcommittee and the need for a student advocacy center.
 - The retention subcommittee will soon be presenting its recommendations on April 29.
 - Dr. Gaymon said her subcommittee met with the Auburn Students and Community for Change, but primarily with the students who are in the organization.
 - Goal of the meeting was to listen to the students' request for a student advocacy center. She said it was a very productive conversation with the students.
 - Led Dr. Gaymon to think about what infrastructure we already have on campus and she reached out to Kevin Coonrod about his role on campus as an ombudsman. She asked him to share his thoughts on whether a student advocacy center could operate in a similar manner as the ombud's office based on what the students expressed to her that they wanted.

- One thing, Dr. Gaymon said she learned from the students that they do not feel like there is a clear space at a centralized level that was clearly in place for student advocacy, and in particular, Black student advocacy.
 - Acknowledged there would be needs for advocacy by other student subpopulations on campus.
 - The students said they didn't think was a place to help them to navigate campus spaces or for an entity to advocate on the students' behalf.
 - This does exist on a small scale in individual departments or colleges, but there is not a campus-wide advocacy center.
 - However, outside of these individual units, there is not a place where the students feel heard or supported. Also, there needs to be organizational structure so the area feels empowered to really push change and to really help things move forward.
- Graduate student Gretel Thornton said they want a space where they not only get information, but a place where they feel they belong. A place that is designated just for Black students, tutoring, fellowship, student advocacy, people to talk to and not run by a European-American person. They want someone to run it who understands their feelings and experiences.
- Dr. Gaymon shared a story from an African American student who spoke at the meeting. The student was referencing an experience with a current student and said that a friend of hers was in a class and the professor had told the student that he didn't think braids were professional.
- Lastella Paradise-Watson said the meeting format was very open and the students spoke about a lot of different things, but they were concerned about having an advocacy center.
 - She said that a professor saying braids are not professional stood out to her. She thought it was a big issue for a professor to feel comfortable to say that to someone and feel that there are not any types of consequences for the statement or any type of discipline.
 - She said the university needs to have policies in place so students can report these incidences and professors can get in trouble for those types of things. Students are afraid to speak up because the professors will negatively affect their graduation and their grades.
 - We can't change people, but we can make people be respectful. We need a penalty where people can be penalized for these types of actions no matter who they are.
- Kevin Coonrod said we do have some things set up. [BERT](#) is educational in nature. Complaints can be made and the people in Student Affairs can

contact the person against whom the complaint is made. Student Affairs can discuss why the statement is inappropriate and how it is affecting people.

- Coonrod said Auburn has a no [retaliation policy](#) for all university employees. No employee can be retaliated against for making a good faith complaint of wrongdoing.
- [Anti-harassment and discrimination policy](#) if someone is discriminated against or harassing someone based on race that is actionable and that would go through the Affirmative Action office.
- Dr. Clayton said students indicated they don't realize they have these resources on campus and all of this feeds into the climate. She said we need to be intentional with how we circulate this information each semester.
- Jailin Sanders said that a lot of students do not know [BERT](#) and we need to promote that better. It would be very beneficial as the culture of our campus improves.
- Dr. JoEllen Sefton said female faculty aren't comfortable reporting bullying or sexual harassment for fear of retribution, so how can we expect students to do something that faculty aren't comfortable doing? She said we put the burden on students with this system, but it is up to us to change the climate for the students.
- Kevin Coonrod said we should provide a "space of safety" that is welcoming to students. The prevailing feeling among the students in the meeting was that that they don't feel welcome and they want to. They also don't feel safe, appreciated or valued. They thought the institute that the subcommittee is working on would be a natural place for this type of space. An institute for the Black experience in the South. Center for Advocacy – I really like the idea of teaching advocacy skills to the students.
- Dr. Clayton called the conversation to a close at 4:01 p.m., so that the subcommittees would have an hour for discussion.

Subcommittee Break-outs

Student Retention

Chair: Dr. Joffery Gaymon

Members: Akilah Alwan, Madison Birckhead, Mikayla Brown, Chacolby Burns-Johnson, Angela Cannon, Rick Cook, Oladiran Fasina, Ada Ruth Huntley, Seymour Irby, Ronny Isaac, Lastella Paradise-Watson, Gretel Thornton, Jeffrey Turnipseed and Rett Waggoner

- Committee discussed and reviewed the comprehensive retention summary that included an overview of the data, trends, information shared from context area expert presentations.
- Initial themes were discussed and included an initial discussion of key items to include in the SWOT analysis.

Equity & Social Justice Center

Chair: Dr. Melody Russell

Members: Katrina Akande, Michael Bennett, Michael Brown, Taffye Clayton, Kevin Coonrod, Robin Jaffe, Kimberly Mulligan, Jared Russell, Jailin Sanders, Joellen Sefton, Kamden Strunk, Giovanna Summerfield & Gretchen VanValkenburg

- Dr. Russell had a phone meeting with Dr. Lesley Feracho, Associate Director of the University of Georgia Institute for African American Studies, related the following information about the UGA Institute to the subcommittee to provide insights on existing aspirant institutes. Below is an overview of main points from the discussion.

Strengths:

- Centralized area for faculty to research, and for student engagement, African American studies and research; connects faculty and students with community.
- Provides venue for debates; symposiums; presentations on the complexities of African American experience
- Provides information and research/scholarship on the African American experience.
- Space for engaging with colleagues and students (e.g. teaching, research)
- Core faculty in the Institute comprised of tenure track faculty from multiple disciplines (the institute is interdisciplinary). The institute includes a director and associate director. They also have a joint appointment with UGA's Franklin College of Arts and Sciences and Institute. Additionally, they have affiliate faculty and are revisiting criteria and applications for affiliate faculty.

Challenges:

- Resources and resource allocation
- Obtaining funding for sustainability is an ongoing challenge.
- Would like a stronger seat at the table with administrators
- Did not have any major issues in regard to title and focus of institute (e.g. African American Studies Institute).

General comments:

- The institute has graduate certificates in African American studies, and majors and minors as well.
- Collegial academic arm. They give awards based on work in African American studies, and for doing research in the Institute.
- They measure success by how successful their faculty are relative to tenure and promotion in their units since faculty have joint appointments.

- People from all different fields collaborate through the Institute, adding to the richness of the Center.
- Discussion within AU Task Force Institute Subcommittee began following this report/overview.
 - UGA Institute has strong connections to academic units – this can be a strength and weakness. We will be recruiting faculty to join something new. UGA grew out of an academic unit. We are starting from scratch.
 - Flexibility. We can do what we want because we are creating what we are.
 - We want to be sustainable for 30 and more years.
 - UGAs started in a small area and has been moved several times to different spaces.
 - The UGA Institute has been in existence in some form for almost 30 years
 - Things we need to consider for our institute:
 - Sustainability
 - Scope
 - Outcomes for students and faculty
 - Growth and engagement
 - Impact
 - We have two upcoming focus groups with faculty.
 - This will give us an opportunity to gain insight on faculty and staff perspectives for the institute.
 - There will be a focus group with faculty and staff on April 23 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and April 27 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tables will be spaced out for social distancing and lunch will be provided.
 - On May 14, we will have a third group meeting, this time with administrators.
 - Invitations were sent to the Auburn Black Caucus, and some of the faculty and administrators conducting research and scholarship on the African American experience based on the data we gathered from Deans, Directors, Associate Deans.
 - PowerPoint presentation for the focus groups will include a timeline, summary of progress to date; conversational approach to conversation. We will provide time to think, write, pair, and share reflection questions for attendees.
 - In the sessions, give timeline and presentation on the inventory, Auburn research on race, equity, and justice that we already have in place; listening sessions; formalize concept and scope; reflection questions.
 - We brainstormed questions and discussed who would lead the conversations.
 - Discussion thoughts for listening sessions:

- We need to give preparatory material in advance to the attendees so they will have a good idea of what the meeting will be about and what questions to ask.
- An initial reaction to what we are doing: We also need to determine if the institute will focus more on what has happened in the past or be more forward looking (or a combination)?
- What are the defining elements of this Institute given we are in the deep South and in the Auburn community: What are the impact areas for our work? How can the scholars contribute to this?
- We don't want this to be just about history. We want to have this conversation be future oriented. Civil rights efforts in a new age way of thinking. History and innovation: Still, what are going to be the impact areas? How do students gain knowledge for looking forward?
- Manner in which we engage in social justice via social network. How can we advocate differently and more effectively now?
- STEM: Educational initiatives and health disparities.
- Discussed a format for PP.
 - Slide deck
 - Proposal
 - Mission and Vision
 - Education and initiative
 - Internal and external outcomes.
- Discussed the focus groups and invited subcommittee Task Force members to the focus groups.