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"DIVERSITY ENHANCEMENT FOR THE UNL COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE"

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"DIVERSITY ENHANCEMENT FOR THE UNL COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE"

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This session focuses on the efforts of the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska to bring about a change of perceptions within the faculty and students regarding issues of diversity.

Issues of diversity are never simple. The issues are rarely simply about people of color. In educational environments, diversity is frequently defined by a broader set of concerns—e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs—as well as disciplinary differences. Recent literature on issues of diversity suggests that while significant strides are being made to increase the support for more diverse educational environments, there is room for much improvement.

The following discussion focuses on the efforts of the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska to bring about a change of perceptions within the faculty and students regarding issues of diversity. The goals of the project were:

- To foster a more supportive educational environment for diversity;
- To increase diversity experiences of the student body;
- To promote a greater sense of community involvement and participation;
- To develop a plan with input from students and faculty, which would assist in improving the quality of the learning environment; and,
- To explore opportunities for faculty and student organizations (e.g. SPAN, AIAS, ASID, APX) to incorporate multicultural components/elements in the classroom and/or student activities.

The goals of the project were achieved by assessing the supportiveness of people in the College for the broad set of diversity concerns through a survey done in 1998 and 1999. The study also aimed at heightening awareness of perceived diversity issues through a series of workshop discussions. The paper concludes with speculations as to ways of improving the quality of the learning environment to make it more supportive of diverse

groups.

This study arose from a series of events beginning with an in-house panel discussion in the College of Architecture on May 1, 1997. From that discussion, a series of perceived issues arose concerning diversity within the college, as well as a plan of action for the next three semesters. During the Fall semester of 1997, the College conducted focus groups for a survey, created the survey, researched multicultural materials, and collaborated with other UNL departments/colleges involved in diversity issues in an attempt to assess the quality of the learning and teaching environments for minority and female students and faculty.

In the Spring semester of 1998, the first survey was distributed to deal with a broad range of diversity issues related to gender, racial/ethnic minorities, disabilities, nationality, lifestyle and disciplinary differences. The results of the first questionnaire analyzed perceptions that were documented during the previous semester, specifically perceptual differences among students, staff and faculty, regarding a variety of issues. Also, the College held meetings with all departments, students and faculty/staff within the College to discuss the findings of the survey. Based on the results of the survey and meetings, a number of educational activities were planned. These activities, or multicultural sessions, consisted of activities through workshops, seminars, and classroom discussions, and addressed issues that arose from the survey results.

In the Fall semester of 1998 the College conducted a series of planning meetings, composed of the research team and a representative from each of the student organizations within the College (e.g. SPAN, AIAS, ASID), which were designed to promote communication between students and faculty, as well as, to gain input on activities that would help to improve the learning/teaching environments for the College, in regards to diversity.

In the Spring of 1999, the same questionnaire was distributed. The results of the questionnaire were compiled and analyzed. The analysis focused on identifying major points of agreement and disagreement between three key groups: 1) males and females, 2) minority and non-minority, and 3) student and faculty/staff. The analysis takes form in this paper.

Although the study considered the broad array of diversity issues, in this paper we focus our attention on three main topics: racial/ethnicity issues, gender issues, and student/faculty/staff issues. We will begin with the racial/ethnicity issues. The findings of this section of the survey indicate that the overall climate in the College of Architecture, and a majority of the students are supportive of racial and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, both minority and non-minority students tend to believe that discrimination of minority students has fallen over the previous year, down 27.2% and 7.7%, respectively. However, neither student population (minorities nor non-minorities) believes that the College has adequately achieved the desired diversity as of now. The data seem to suggest that the College environment is ready for diversity. Changes are being made to create a more supportive environment for a racially/ethnically diverse

population, but the changes have yet to make a measurable difference.

With regard to issues of gender, the results of the survey are similar to the racial/ethnic section, in that the overall climate is generally perceived to be supportive of gender issues, but adequate diversity has yet to be achieved. Discrimination towards both males and females within the College is perceived to be on the decline. Yet despite this, 40.7% of the females surveyed have personally experienced or observed discrimination based on a person's status as a female. Although the percentage is down by 17.4% from the previous year, the number is still relatively high.

The findings with regard to faculty/staff and student issues indicate that in the past year significant acknowledgments were made and steps taken to bring together the students and the faculty. They also indicate that certain divisions that were present last year between the two groups remain evident and in fact are more severe than the previous year. For example, over the previous year, there was an increased percentage of students and faculty/staff that perceived supportiveness for females, international students and students of other disciplines. Despite these increases, the overall levels of agreement are relatively low. For example, only 50% of the faculty/staff believe that the climate is supportive of females and only 42.8% of the faculty/staff believe that the College is supportive of people from another discipline.

One possible response to the results, now that awareness has been raised would be to allow "our students to see students of color and women assert authority, and be placed in roles of power, on design juries, in studios, and in decision making positions in the department." Furthermore, in addition to raising awareness, the College ought to take action in more aggressive recruitment of minorities, females and international faculty, staff and students. This recruitment effort can take place in the form of guided tours of the College. Also, seminars or workshops can be provided for minority and female high school students with interest in architecture. Finally, once the recruitment has occurred, measures need to be taken to retain those students. The College needs to identify ways in which the course content can be more supportive of diversity issues.

Recommendations raised seem to point to discussions with faculty, staff and students about a series of workshops, seminars or speakers that are focused on specific issues of diversity. Since awareness has already been raised through the previous surveys and discussions, these activities should consist primarily of procedures and recommendations that aim to make a friendlier climate towards minorities, international students, and females, which in turn will not only attract those groups, but help to retain them as well.

Presenters:

Dr. James J. Potter is a Professor of Architecture in the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has a B.S. in Architectural Engineering (Cal Poly) and a M.Arch in Building Systems Design (SUNY) as well as the Ph.D. in Man-Environment Relations (Penn State). For over twenty years, he has been involved in environmental design research. During that time, he has pursued his desire to bridge the gap between the teaching of architecture, the development of community based projects

and the conceptualization and execution of relevant research in environmental design. He has been a visiting scholar in schools of architecture in the USA and abroad (e.g., Ireland, Nigeria, Brazil, Germany, Russia). His basic research goal has been to expand our knowledge about the impact of physical and social change (especially rapid development) upon people's well being. The ultimate purpose of the research is the development of predictive capabilities as well as strategies to ameliorate the negative effects of rapid change upon people's well being.

Dr. Rodrigo Cantarero is an Associate Professor and Chair in the Community and Regional Planning Department in the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has a B.S. in Urban and Regional Planning (Iowa State), an M.A. in Community and Regional Planning and an M.A. in Economics (University of Iowa), and a Ph.D. in Community and Regional Planning (University of Southern California). In the past ten years he has been involved in minority health research in Nebraska, was a member and chair of UNL's Chancellor's Commission on the Status of People of Color, is a member of UNL's Latino Research Initiative group, and has done considerable work in Nicaragua.