May 5, 2015 Departmental Diversity Committee Meeting


The meeting began with a brief talk by Jill Rand from the College of the Environment. She shared some of her department’s successes in engaging in diversity with faculty, staff and students. Attendees then broke out into group to discuss the following questions: what steps can be taken in the 1st 90 days to improve retention of students of color and what can we do to stay in touch with students between the time they accept and their first quarter. The summary below is a compilation of all of the group feedback.

What steps can be taken in the 1st 90 days to improve retention of students of color?
Four main themes emerged from the group: 1) orientation, 2) communication, 3) departmental support systems, and 4) events.

1) Orientation
Participants identified that it was important to start off the year right with an orientation. Departments have integrated diversity into orientation events and activities. Students have also been directed to the students of color orientation that happens prior to the main orientation. In some cases an offsite retreat has helped build camaraderie and support for students in a cohort.

2) Communication
Frequent communication with students is key to improving retention and supporting success. Some departments have found particular success when communicating with students prior to the toughest part of the quarter such as during mid-terms. Sending an email congratulating students at the end of the quarter has also been found to be successful.
3) Departmental Support Systems

Once students start the quarter participants revealed a number of effective strategies to provide support to connect students with peer mentors and establishing a strong relationship with an advisor. Peer mentors should be strategically choosing and training peer mentors to provide support to students of color. Departmentally based diversity ambassadors who act similarly to GO-MAP’s diversity ambassadors. Other identified successful strategies include GPA’s meeting with all students of color individually during the quarter. Also, it has helped provide students with welcomed support and create an opportunity for students to ask questions. These meetings can be as short as fifteen minutes in some cases and still result in impactful connections. One GPA shared that they email students asking about their research interests and personal hobbies. This information is later used to connect students with each other. Another department has found that hosting coffee on Tuesday afternoons allows students to feel welcome to ask the questions that they need. As students work through tough classes it has been found to be helpful to help facilitate group study and tutoring options. In addition to the coffee hour opportunities to talk it was suggested that it is sometimes helpful to create spaces for students to connect and talk candidly amongst themselves without staff or faculty present.

4) Events

A variety of events can help with retention throughout the quarter. Some departments have found diversity month lunches to be helpful. This can be further extended to celebrate diversity month in a series of activities over the course of a month. Targeting faculty and staff during these diversity months can be another way to extend the environment of support for students regarding diversity. Departments have also found it to be helpful to take advantage of guest speakers of color visiting departments. When these guests visit intimate lunches with students of color are arranged with the speakers.

What can we do to stay in touch with students between the time they accept and their first quarter of classes?

Student visits to campus are a great way to connect them to resources and help them adjust to Seattle. Some departments have found it to be helpful to coordinate student visits with GO-MAP Prospective Student Days so that students can connect with other students of color to build community and learn about campus resources. The 2016 Prospective Student Days will take place Thurs, March 31st and Fri, April 1st, 2016. When students visit, departments have found it
helpful to meet individually with students. In some cases students found it helpful to get a tour of various neighborhoods to help them learn more about the city and resources. Another practice found to be helpful is connecting current students with incoming students either individually or by connecting students to groups such as SACNAS and the Latina Student Group. If student visits can’t be coordinated with GO-MAP’s Prospective Student Days departments should still feel free to send students to GO-MAP throughout the year.

Helping students connect with one another has been found to be very helpful in the creation of support systems. The sense of camaraderie and community built early can get students successfully through their first quarter. Some departments have created list serves and Facebook pages to help connect students prior to fall quarter. Departments have also connected students to the GO-MAP: Find a Roommate/Housing Facebook page to connect graduate students of color looking for housing. It was suggested that information about departmental orientations be sent out over the summer.

In general, having staff and faculty available to answer questions and help guide students has been found to be successful. Having faculty call students personally to welcome students has been shown to make an impact. Students often don’t feel empowered to ask questions regarding financial aid. It was suggested that staff in departments empower and support students in navigating their financial aid process.