Commentary

The faculty, staff, and graduate students on college campuses and for whom university ombuds serve and assist, may be as sincere and altruistic a people as can be found assembled together in today's society. For seven years, the UConn Ombuds Office has been a space for members of this community to solve problems, discuss what drives them, examine their personal goals and how those goals define, and at times compete with, the mission of the university. During the two years represented by this report, many visitors discussed their disillusionment with attitudes, practices, and behaviors in their work environments. Of top of mind in this commentary are the women, people of color, international faculty and students, and other underrepresented members of our community.   Many of them expressed thoughts of leaving UConn and some have indeed left.   A recurring theme in these discussions, sometimes named, other times implied, is loneliness.

The communitarian scholar Amitai Etzioni describes strong community as an antidote to loneliness. In thinking about community, these visitors provide a context of what diversity and inclusion has or has not come to mean in our community. When encountering academic cultural norms where race, gender, and ethnicity are the context, people shared how choosing silence leads to isolation and how giving voice often leads to agonizing interactions. The failure to engage with one another in a way befitting a community – as Christopher Lebron writes, *with care, charity, and grace* – is an encumbrance to our entire community, leaving the values of diversity and inclusion, at best, putative. Diversity and inclusion are tests of the strength, or weakness, of our community.

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At the Listening Sessions held by the VP/CDO Search Committee the question was posed "What can we do to support diversity and inclusion and the new Vice President and CDO?" It seems a part of the answer is to seek and share experiences about how traditional norms – that is, behaviors and practices that seem traditional at UConn and in higher education – obstruct the inclusion of people among us who were not participants in the development of those long-standing norms. In this engagement lie the reasons why inclusivity eludes us.   We can acknowledge the discomfort of reappraising our norms, including the way in which we communicate about scholarship, teach in classrooms, and socialize as community members. That discomfort will be necessary in ideas that are genuinely transformative. To be sure, in predominately white institutions, that discomfort will be felt by those who are presently comfortable. This question posed by the search committee calls upon the comfortable class of faculty, administrators, staff, and students to be alert to ideas that bring discomfort, to be suspicious of rhetoric absent of discomfort, and to advocate for those among us, including our new VP/CDO, who have the expertise, experiences, and commitment to generate action.

In 2005, The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) unveiled the initiative *Making Excellence Inclusive* to help campuses align diversity, inclusion, and educational quality. The term *Inclusive Excellence* captured the initiative's implications – that excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service can't be achieved without faculty, student, administrator, and staff diversity. In the intervening time, the UConn student population has diversified though the percentage of faculty of color has lagged markedly behind student diversity. *The Daily Campus* recently highlighted demographic disparities between underrepresented students and faculty at UConn that mirror those across U.S. colleges and universities. White faculty at UConn, on the other hand, are overrepresented compared to both student and Connecticut state populations. Nationally, students of color identify diversifying the faculty as the greatest need in higher education and similar sentiments have been expressed by our own UConn students. If diversity and inclusion at UConn is grounded in the spirit of the AAC&U initiative, these statistics tell us we cannot achieve institutional excellence – that presently, we are not excellent.

Though intentional recruitment and hiring efforts over the past two decades have led to modest and transient increases in faculty and staff diversity, poor retention has stalled durable progress. In this sense, successes in the early *diversifying* phase of *Inclusive Excellence* have become failures in the second *inclusion* phase. For many visitors, a marker for belonging is the allocation of the resources, opportunities and privileges that are necessary for a fulfilling life at UConn. Norms governing scholarly, classroom, and social environments mediate interpersonal and departmental discourse, interpretations of scholarly and instructional merit, and service assignments, that form the milieu in which people seek professional growth and affirmation. In addition to running counter-current to individual professional success, dissonant norms can offend and preclude participation in discussions over ideas, planning, and decision making – the systemic organizing activities of academia. As in all communities, academia's norms are the street-level inclusive practices that function independently of, and often in spite of, the aspirational claims and rhetoric of diversity.

The connection between loneliness and feeling repelled by norms haunts our community. Attempting to connect with those more comfortable, more accustomed to predominately white institutions, feels frustrating and dangerous. Comfortable – that is, traditional – individuals and groups bristle and retract from challenges to local and campus-wide norms, mistaking our norms as values. But community norms are not values, nor are they merely a collection of individual choices or preferences. Rather, norms are behavioral guidelines of action that help us execute our values, though the longer standing the norms it seems, the easier it is to confuse this distinction.

Academic institutions are like other communities and are based on shared values, norms, and reinforcing relationships supporting a common meaning or mission. Community norms arise from the people who comprise a community.   Over hundreds of years, predominately white institutions have evolved cultural norms from an inadequately diverse population of people by today's standards. Through this lens, it's understandable why, after spending a period of time

at an academic institution, underrepresented people and diversity workers are frustrated with many of those norms, with the allocation of resources, opportunities, and privileges.

Putting our norms on the table is the hard work of achieving *Inclusive Excellence*. If institutional norms evolve from the people present in an institution, it's axiomatic that changing the people present will change norms. This notion poses no threat to long held institutional values because norms are not values. (Indeed, diversity and inclusion are now decades-long stated values – values that when inculcated will result in excellence). Nor are norms virtues. Alasdair Macintyre described virtues as those habits, predispositions and individual traits of industry within people that are necessary to produce the "goods" inherent to a practice (in our case the practice of higher education, among which the goods include discovery, transferring knowledge, and civic responsibility). Goods inherent to higher education benefit everyone and are tethered to our values (for example, *the advancement of knowledge leads to the betterment of society*). Reappraising norms naturally deepens and fortifies our academic virtues as it does our values.

Our community of higher education is a domain of ideas and knowledge. Some say also the pursuit of truth. But the truth can't always be ascertained in a convincing way and we're left to rely on evidence and its power to persuade one another. Our norms of scholarship: peer review, debate, critique, experimentation rooted in scientific method, and academic freedom are traits that maintain those channels of persuasion. In such a community, sole reliance on policies and laws to coerce norms of behavior are not only likely to fall short but also cut across the most powerful currency in our academic culture – the ability to persuade one another. Fifteen years after the AAC&U initiative on *Inclusive Excellence*, we are being called to engage, to listen to one another with care, charity, and grace, to seek and advocate for the discomfort in proposed solutions, and make use of our defining community traits so lacking elsewhere in today's society: our thirst for new ideas and our willingness to be persuaded by them.

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