

## **Introduction**

### **The Campus Community**

One of the primary missions of higher education institutions is unearthing and disseminating knowledge. Academic communities expend a great deal of effort fostering an environment where this mission is nurtured, with the understanding that institutional climate has a profound effect on the academic community's ability to excel in research and scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The climate on college campuses not only affects the creation of knowledge, but also has a significant impact on members of the academic community who, in turn, contribute to the creation of the campus environment.<sup>2</sup> The necessity for creating a more inclusive, welcoming climate on college campuses is supported by several national education association reports.

A 1990 report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education<sup>3</sup>, suggests that in order to build a vital community of learning a college or university must provide an environment where,

...intellectual life is central and where faculty and students work together to strengthen teaching and learning, where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed, where the dignity of all individuals is affirmed and where equality of opportunity is vigorously pursued, and where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported.

In addition, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (1995) challenges higher education institutions "to affirm and enact a commitment to equality, fairness, and

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<sup>1</sup>For more detailed discussions of climate issues see Bauer, 1998, Boyer, 1990; Peterson, 1990; Rankin, 1994, 1998; Tierney & Dilley, 1996

<sup>2</sup>For further examination of the effects of climate on campus constituent groups and their respective impact on the campus climate see Bauer, 1998, Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Peterson, 1990; Rankin, 1994, 1998, 1999; Tierney, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Boyer, E. (1990). *Campus life: In Search of Community*. Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

inclusion.” AAC&U proposes that colleges and universities commit to “the task of creating inclusive educational environments in which all participants are equally welcome, equally valued, and equally heard.” The report suggests that in order to provide a framework within which a vital community of learning can be built, a primary mission of the academy must be to create an environment that ideally cultivates diversity and celebrates difference.

Colleges and universities therefore seek to create an environment characterized by equal access for all students, faculty and staff regardless of cultural differences, where individuals are not just tolerated but valued. Institutional mission statements and strategic plans suggest that it is crucial to increase multicultural awareness and understanding, within an environment of mutual respect and cooperation, a climate that is nurtured by dialogue and evidenced by a pattern of civil interaction. However, on many campuses, such a climate that is equally supportive of all of its members does not exist.<sup>4</sup>

In the fall semester 2002, the Diversity Council at North Dakota State University (NDSU) contracted with an outside consultant<sup>5</sup> to assist them in identifying challenges confronting the University community with respect to underrepresented<sup>6</sup> groups through an internal assessment. The assessment was a proactive initiative by the Diversity Council to review the climate on campus for underrepresented groups. The results of the internal assessment will be used to identify specific strategies for addressing the challenges and supporting positive diversity initiatives through the development of a strategic plan to maximize equity.

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<sup>4</sup> Institutions of higher learning are defenders of first amendment rights and academic freedom. Campuses are venues for dialogue for different voices and viewpoints and this discourse must, not only be allowed, but encouraged. Universities and colleges should provide a safe space where **all** voices are respected, where no voice is silenced simply because it is antithetical to our own. However, while respecting the fundamental right to free speech, nothing justifies acts of violence or harassment. It is our recommendation that campus policies concerning first amendment rights be reviewed, as well as official university activities, including course descriptions, to ensure that they are forums for intellectual inquiry and not vehicles of discrimination, intimidation, or hate.

<sup>5</sup> Rankin & Associates, Consulting was the firm hired to conduct the project

<sup>6</sup> Underrepresented groups can be based on age, ancestry, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability, national origin, religious creed, or sexual orientation.

This report provides an overview of the process for maximizing equity and the findings of the internal assessment including the results of the campus-wide survey and the content analysis of comments provided by participants in the survey. The internal assessment will help to lay the groundwork for future initiatives.