

From the Margin to the Center: Successfully Shifting the Organization of Multiculturalism at Macalester College

An Interim Report on the Progress of the Department of Multicultural Life
(Submitted by Joi D. Lewis, Dean of Multicultural Life – Revised November 22, 2004)

“The mission of the Department of Multicultural Life is to integrate the values and ethos of historically under-represented peoples, discourses, thoughts and ideas as a catalyst for transforming the traditional ways of doing the work of the College into a more inclusive model. The goals of the Department of Multicultural Life are to identify and assess multicultural core competencies for the campus community; create partnerships with academic and administrative departments to infuse multiculturalism throughout all aspects of campus life; and foster and promote an inclusive physical environment that welcomes the entire College community, particularly those who have been historically under-represented. We firmly assert that the work of multiculturalism cannot be done from the edge in isolation rather, we must do this work from the center with likely and unlikely allies across our campus.”

In the last decade, colleges and universities across the country have become more and more diverse racially and ethnically, as well as across gender, socioeconomic, sexual orientation, abilities, and religious lines. As institutions of higher education continue to grow and expand across these lines, it is imperative that offices and departments of Multicultural Affairs grow and expand as well. It is also imperative that colleges and universities as a whole take responsibility for infusing multiculturalism throughout all campus departments, programs, and services. Many Offices of Multicultural Affairs on college campuses are organized with one or a few individuals responsible for providing campus-wide programs and services that relate to multiculturalism, which usually translates to “managing” students of color.

This model, used since the 1960s, puts multiculturalism at the fringe of college campuses, allowing the larger institution to be absolved of any responsibility for addressing the opportunities and/or issues that multiculturalism may present. At that same time, Macalester College was organized in the same manner. However, with the creation of the Department of Multicultural Life in the fall of 2002 and the continued expansion and development of the Women’s and Gender Studies and American Studies: Comparative Racial Formations academic departments, a new model of organizing multiculturalism has emerged. The work of thinking about multiculturalism has shifted from the margins of the College toward the center.

This interim report details the strategy we used to shift successfully the work of multiculturalism from a paradigm grounded in scarce resources, isolation, and marginalized students, to a paradigm of centrality, accountability, and necessity. The success of our systemic and programmatic initiatives, as well as active involvement of faculty, students, staff, and alumni across campus, has challenged the Macalester

community to expand our understanding of how multiculturalism can be experienced by the campus community.

Before reviewing these initiatives, it is important to acknowledge a critical conceptual framework that guides our work: the understanding that we all have multiple and fluid intersecting identities. We also realize that the categories we have constructed in the past to understand students may now be stagnant and not as practical. For example, today's Macalester students require that we shift our understanding of racial identity to include transnational identity, transracial identity, bi-racial/multiracial identity and bi-culturalism. These categories challenge and complicate our traditional understanding of students of color, white students, and international students. The lines originally drawn to assist us in organizing the work of the college are now blurred and call for collaborative approaches across campus and with the larger community. This report will illuminate efforts to:

1. **Increase success of students of color and multiracial students**
2. **Reconstitute the Multicultural Advisory Board**
3. **Create and affirm safe and sacred spaces**
4. **Build coalitions**
5. **Validate and recognize students, faculty, and staff**

Finally, the report will review **challenges and directions for the future.**

INCREASE SUCCESS OF STUDENTS OF COLOR AND MULTIRACIAL STUDENTS

The history of the United States has been to frame some as intellectuals and others as having inferior intelligence. This distinction is played out in U.S. higher education as it relates to students of color and multiracial students. George Lipsitz (1998), in his groundbreaking book, *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness*, notes that "unequal opportunities for education play a crucial role in racializing life chances in the United States" (p. 33). He further states that "...the 1954 *Brown* case, ruled against de jure segregation in the abstract, the decision provided no means for dismantling the structures that crafted advantages for white students out of the disadvantages of students of color" (p. 54). It is because of this context that at Macalester, there has historically been a disconnect between multiculturalism and academic excellence, specifically as it relates to students of color and multiracial students. The Department of Multicultural Life, in partnerships with the Macalester Academic Excellence Center and the Alumni Relations office, has created two program initiatives to address this disconnect. Those programs are the **Emerging Scholars Program (ESP)** and the **Alumni of Color and Friends Host Family Program.**

In its earlier form, the **Emerging Scholars Program (ESP)** was formerly called the Allies for Academic Success. The new program, which began this fall (2004), requires first-year students to apply for admission to the program. The primary goal of ESP is to assist students of color and multiracial students during their transition to college, as they are entrenched in the important intellectual project of becoming a

scholar. The Emerging Scholars Program is also designed to increase the number of students of color and multiracial students at Macalester who are selected to participate in and receive opportunities for study abroad/away, internships, fellowships, and scholarships, and to increase their application and admittance to graduate and professional schools. The design of ESP was modeled after the **Mellon Mayes Undergraduate Fellowship Program (MMUF)** on Macalester's campus, which is directed by **Peter Rachleff, Professor, History Department, and Ellen Guyer, Dean of Academic Programs**. The MMUF Program, currently in its fifth year at Macalester, was created in 1988 by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with the fundamental objective to increase the number of minority students, and others with a demonstrated commitment to eradicating racial disparities, who will pursue doctorates in the arts and sciences and become faculty members at colleges and universities. The intellectual atmosphere that is created among students of color in the MMUF program serves as a great example for the structure of ESP, and the students involved in MMUF are excellent role models for the first-year participants in ESP. This year, 32 Emerging Scholars participate weekly in study circles to explore their development as scholars at Macalester. They also meet monthly to explore transition issues and work on seminar program requirements. ESP focuses on four main components valuable to every student: academic excellence, identity development, social adjustment, and future opportunities. There are 6 Scholar Mentors, who are upperclass student scholars. Each mentor is assigned a small group of first-year Emerging Scholars. There are also 6 Staff mentors who work with the program. **Sedric McClure, who is on staff in the Max Center and the Department of Multicultural Life, coordinates the program.**

The Alumni of Color and Friends Host Family Program connects Macalester alumni of color with first-year students of color/multiracial students. The program, an idea which first surfaced during the 1999 Alumni of Color Reunion, connects Macalester alumni with first-year students of color in a meaningful and supportive way. It provides students new to the Twin Cities and Macalester with the community resources they need to support their studies and their transition to life here at the college. This program is designed to give new students an off-campus resource person with shared experiences at Macalester who can assist with students' adjustment to campus and provide links to the greater Twin Cities community. The program gives students an opportunity to build a relationship with an alum who was successful at Macalester and has continued that success in his or her career. There are a number of ways for host families and students to connect, such as on-campus and off-campus activities (i.e., a worship service, a shared meal, or a cultural event). There are also college-sponsored events where students and hosts can interact. The Alumni of Color Host Family Program is in its second year, and there are 23 pairs of students and hosts matched this year. The program is led by **Afifa Benwahoud, Department Coordinator for Multicultural Life** and **Celine Clark, Associate Director of Alumni Relations**.

RE-CONSTITUTION OF THE MULTICULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD

While we have made significant progress in recent years, given our aspirations and the challenges we face, we have much work to do. The Multicultural Advisory

Board, a group of faculty, staff, and students, are working to examine the issues we currently face in the area of multiculturalism and provide on-going advice and leadership in this area. The members of this group represent various academic disciplines and academic ranks, different levels of administrative responsibility, and different areas of influence within the college. As a part of the group's charge, we will model how multidisciplinary groups with members who hold diverse perspectives can work together to promote change. **The Multicultural Advisory Board** is co-chaired in 2004/05 by **Dean of Multicultural Life, Joi D. Lewis, and Jan Serie, Professor of Biology and Director, Center for Scholarship and Teaching.** The board was reconstituted by President Rosenberg in the Spring of 2004. The Board, in some ways, represents a continuation of the work of a series of multicultural task forces and advisory groups that include the Internal and External Multicultural Audit Task Forces, the Council on Multicultural Affairs, and the 2002/2003 Multicultural Advisory Board, which was created during the inception of the Department of Multicultural Life. While the work of this Board will evolve through the insights of its members, its initial charge is as follows:

- a. Develop, through reading and discussion, a clear statement outlining the benefits, primarily to our students, of creating an educational environment that "prepare[s] people to become intellectually vital and productive citizen-leaders in a world that includes a multiplicity of cultures, perspectives, and needs."
- b. Examine the multicultural issues facing the College, such as the recruitment and retention of domestic students and faculty of color, the development of inclusive curricula and programming, the development of multicultural competence in teaching and advising, and make recommendations to relevant administrative offices for structural and programmatic improvements. Effectively, these recommendations will help guide the College toward its stated goal of having "an environment that values the diverse cultures of our world and recognizes our responsibility to provide a supportive and respectful environment for students, staff and faculty of all cultures and backgrounds."
- c. Serve as an Advisory Board for the Dean of Multicultural Life and the Dean for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, as well as President Rosenberg.
- d. Create benchmarks and assessment strategies that will allow us to monitor progress toward stated goals in the area of multiculturalism.
- e. Develop skills and strategies required to become more effective and influential in supporting meaningful institutional change in the area of multiculturalism.

The work of the Multicultural Advisory Board in 2004-2005 is concentrated in two areas:

1. Multicultural Recruitment and Retention – with a charge from President Rosenberg and the Admissions Committee of the Board of Trustees to:
 - a. define success in multicultural recruitment and retention at Macalester (including the role of the academic experience and campus life.)
 - b. propose strategies necessary for achieving that success
2. Curricular Renewal – The college is currently in an important curricular review process, and we are exploring ways that this board can interface with the work of EPAG.

We have divided our work by creating small working groups with the hope of bringing closure to this project by the May Board of Trustees meeting at which time we will give our recommendations.

CREATING AND AFFIRMING SAFE AND SACRED SPACES

We believe the work in the Department of Multicultural Life is to provide an atmosphere on campus that encourages students to connect their understanding of their own identities with their understanding of how to build authentic relationships across differences. A great deal of this work is done through the **Lealtad-Suzuki Center**, part of the Department of Multicultural Life. The Center is named after Catharine Deaver Lealtad '15, the first African American graduate of Macalester College and a talented doctor; and Esther Torii Suzuki '46, a survivor of the Japanese internment camps during WWII and a six-year member of the Macalester College Alumni Board. Located on the first floor of Kagin Commons, the Lealtad-Suzuki Center is an integral part of Macalester College. The goals of the Lealtad-Suzuki Center are to:

1. Provide multicultural training and development to Macalester faculty, staff, and students to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills pertaining to diversity and multiculturalism.
2. Coordinate and synchronize intentional multicultural programming and services throughout campus.
3. Provide multicultural education through mediums such as personal consultation, literature, video, audio, and artwork.

A few key initiatives that contribute to providing safe and sacred spaces under the leadership of the **Lealtad-Suzuki Center Director, Karla Benson Rutten**, are:

Student Collectives – The Collectives are facilitated by students, faculty, and staff. These spaces have been foundations and springboards for coalitional work between various student groups and across identities. Black Women of the Diaspora, Women of Color, Men of Color, and White Identity Collectives provide students with the opportunity to talk together about issues of power and privilege both within their specific collectives

and in inter-group dialogues. Approximately 70 students are members of the collectives this semester. Each collective is facilitated by Center Associates, who are faculty, staff, and students trained to assist in the work of the Center. To date, 35 Macalester community members have been trained as Center Associates.

Soup and Substance Lunch Series – A monthly lunch series, this program brings students, staff, and faculty together to listen to voices of groups that have been traditionally marginalized, particularly student voices. Soups are provided from local Twin City businesses, and participants engage in dialogues that organized around cultural heritage months. Last year, at least 40 people attended each Soup and Substance (these tended not to be the same 40 people each month, although there were some regulars). The opening Soup and Substance this semester had 58 attendees.

The Allies Project – Participation in the Allies Project gives faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to creating a safe environment and community for all people regardless of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, age, or ability. Twelve people have begun Allies training this year, and 43 people have already participated in the program. The Allies Project is being reviewed this year through a collaborative faculty development Perspectives grant funded by the Bush Foundation.

In addition to the work of the Lealtad-Suzuki Center, the **Cultural House** is another safe and sacred space on Macalester's campus. The Cultural House has a long historic legacy at Macalester as a safe space for domestic student of color/multiracial students and allies who are interested in learning from and contributing to a multicultural environment. The "C-House," as it is fondly referred to by students, strives to be a symbol of connection for people of color at Macalester and in the Twin Cities. Although the cultural house as an entry point is organized around race and culture, there is careful attention paid to the intersection of multiple identities. Programming and many cultural organizations are structured in a diasporic manner that recognizes that race may have variant meanings in a global context. The Cultural House is located at 37 Macalester Street and is currently a multifunctional facility that includes a programming structure, cultural student organization offices, a residential component, resource areas, and comfortable spaces for people to connect with each other. The Cultural House was historically under the leadership of Campus Programs and Residential Life. Since the summer of 2004, the Cultural House has been operating under the structure of the Department of Multicultural Life. The Cultural House continues to be an important coalitional space for students, as well as a home away from home.

There are several programmatic initiatives that are coordinated at the C-House under the direction of **Mattie White, Assistant Director for Campus Programs for Multicultural Life**, and 5 Student Assistants. A few of those programs are listed below:

In the Kitchen With... – This program provides an opportunity for students, faculty and staff to exchange cultural knowledge through oral tradition in an

intimate space. Students discuss cultural practices and the history of food and justice. This program sometimes provides a framework for understanding how some dietary practices of people of color were developed because of racism and may now have health implications. Students also learn how to prepare foods from various traditions and about customs that often originated in racist and classist structures but have been adopted and given new powerful cultural meaning. This program provides an excellent space for students to share their ways of being over a great meal.

Fridays After Class – This is a new weekly program that encourages students to meet Fridays at 4:30pm to connect in an informal space. Students discuss current campus and community issues, play board games, listen to poetry, sing, dance, celebrate birthdays, or just hang out. This program was created to have an intentional time and space for students of color/multiracial students and their allies to find each other and connect after a full and challenging week.

Poetry Slam – This program provides an artistic outlet for students to express their activism, politics, joy, anger, hope and a myriad of other cognitive and emotive underpinnings in a space that is both validating and competitive. Poetry slams at the C-house are grounded in the contemporary spoken word and hip hop tradition.

BUILDING COALITIONS

The Department of Multicultural Life is committed to providing leadership in advancing the multicultural vision of the college to the extent that it can be accomplished in partnership with the Macalester Community. We have been successful in this endeavor through our work with academic departments, particularly the American Studies: Comparative Racial Formations Department and the Women's and Gender Studies Department; Diversity Weekend; and the Pluralism and Unity (P&U) Program.

American Studies: Comparative Racial Formations – The reciprocal relationship between the Department of Multicultural Life and American Studies: Comparative Racial Formations has evolved into an infrastructure that supports both an intellectual home for the study of race and ethnicity and the administrative structure for the practice of multiculturalism. This collaboration fosters a visible community of scholars, practitioners, activists and students who are engaged in the important work of multiculturalism. The American Studies Department, led by **Duchess Harris, Associate Professor and Chair**, has been instrumental in partnering with the Department of Multicultural Life to bring a number of important speakers and events to Macalester's campus, including Tim Wise, Helen Zia, Edupoetic, and Angela Davis. American Studies is currently in the process of hiring a Dean for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, who will chair the American Studies department and work in collaboration with the Dean of Multicultural Life to continue to advance the multicultural agenda of the college.

Women's and Gender Studies – For the past seven years, the Women's and Gender Studies Department, led by **Sonita Sarker, Associate Professor and Chair** of Women's & Gender Studies, has initiated and supported classes and campus-wide events that have addressed issues of multiculturalism and the fluidity of multiple identities. Since the inception of the Department of Multicultural Life and the Lealtad-Suzuki Center, Women's and Gender Studies has been a consistent participant and co-sponsor of programs such as "Soup & Substance," the Student Collectives, and featured speakers. In addition, Sonita Sarker and **Scott Morgensen, Assistant Professor** for WGS, both serve on the Multicultural Advisory Board. The ongoing collaboration that the Department of Multicultural Life has with Women's and Gender Studies is integral to the work of multiculturalism at Macalester.

Diversity Weekend 2004 – Multicultural Life, American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies were three of the partners in backing student leadership to organize the most amazing and successful student-led Diversity Weekend that Macalester has seen to date. Students built coalitions among themselves as members of different cultural organizations and organized to bring top scholars George Lipsitz and Vijay Prashad, provocative film maker La La Endera, and important community activists and organizers to campus. Between 60 and 200 people attended each of the plenary sessions; at least 200 people attended the Friday night performance by Mama Mosaic and Macalester students; and the Salsa Del Soul dance attracted over 300 on Saturday evening. We assert that the existence of the collaborative efforts between the Department of Multicultural Life's administrative structure and intellectual home of the American Studies and Women's & Gender Studies departments provide more space for students to use their brilliance and compassion to organize across differences.

Pluralism & Unity (P&U) – The P&U Program engages a diverse group of 30 first year students (including U.S. students of color and multiracial students, U.S. white students, and international students) in a project designed to build competence in talking about race and class. The program uses the Twin Cities as a site for understanding the ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture shape communities. Now in its fifth year, the community of current and former P&U students have assumed critical and visible leadership roles on campus, and many P&U alums credit their experience in P&U for building their confidence, knowledge of the campus community, and creating supportive and meaningful friendships. For the past three years, the President or the Vice President of the Macalester College Student Government have been former P&U students. Both faculty and staff serve on the steering committee of P&U and have consistently forged important alliances among themselves and with students. The P&U Program has just been recently funded for the next three years through a grant from the Otto Bremmer Foundation.

VALIDATION AND RECOGNITION

In the Department of Multicultural Life, we believe strongly in the value of public appreciation for and acknowledgment of academic excellence, hard work, effective programming, alliance building. We have instituted a number of events during first year

student orientation and welcome week, and we do programming during Family Weekend and Commencement week for students of color/multiracial students and their families. “Harambee! A Celebration of Multicultural Moments” is an annual reception in May that celebrates the various multicultural moments at Macalester by recognizing and appreciating the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who have worked with the Department of Multicultural Life. Lealtad-Suzuki Center Awards are also presented at “Harambee!” to honor students who, through their work both in and outside of the classroom, embody the mission of the Department of Multicultural Life and the legacies of the Center’s namesakes and Macalester alumnae, Catherine Lealtad and Esther Suzuki.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Institutional and Departmental Conceptual and Pragmatic Challenges – The history of the United States, and more specifically the history of Macalester, was constructed in the absence of racial minorities and with little to no analysis of race. Macalester has done much to correct this omission, but like the U.S., must move cautiously as we continue our commitment to multiculturalism and its sometimes contentious relationship with internationalism. Macalester is poised to be a leader in this movement as we assert the College’s stated purpose, “to prepare people to become intellectually, vital and productive citizen leaders in a world that includes a multiplicity of cultures, perspectives, and needs.” The framework for the Department of Multicultural Life at Macalester College is grounded in the recognition that given the diversity of the Macalester community, members from distinctly different backgrounds often encounter intense cultural conflicts within the context of the larger society. We have much work left to do in the service of creating an environment that is true to our mission and that prepares students to handle societal and interpersonal conflict in effective ways.

Much of the work that we would like to develop centers around the ways in which race and ethnicity interact with identities based on social class, religion, sexuality, and physical ability. We recognize that there is still much work to be done concerning race, but it is critical that we continue to expand space to examine the ways in which identities intersect.

Resource Challenges – The infrastructure created by the work of the Department of Multicultural Life has clearly made an important difference in students’ lives and in the life of the College. Students are building significant relationships across differences. A broader and more diverse group of faculty, staff and alum are involved in this work. Students of color/multiracial students feel much less marginalized and are less angry with the institution. They have considerably more energy to devote to their intellectual pursuits and to participating in and initiating creative and exciting programming on campus.

This infrastructure is fragile, however, and still under-resourced, in both financial and human resources. This year, Macalester boasts the largest class of students of color and multiracial students since the early 1970’s; however, the staffing and

budgetary resources needed to ensure those students' success has not been increased. The College is faced with difficult financial decisions and with a finite set of resources that must be distributed to seemingly competing interests. It is clear that at this point in time, the College must take reasoned action toward fiscal responsibility. Macalester's Resources and Planning Committee has provided the community with a detailed set of recommendations that include some assessment of the likely impact of these recommendations on the diversity of the student body. To the extent that more resources will be available to the College if it develops a financial aid budget, we expect this decision to have a positive effect on our ability to support a diverse student body in their educational goals. This is an important opportunity for the college to reassert its values in clear support of multiculturalism through reallocation of funds to support this structure in a concrete and more substantial way.

Reference

Lipsitz, G. (1998). *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.