

Cultural Incompetence

Allegations of discrimination at the UO College of Education.

Shadiin Garcia is a graduate student of education leadership and a staff member for the Native American teacher program at the UO College of Education. Garcia, who is Laguna Pueblo and Chicana, moved to Eugene in the summer of 2003 with her partner, a faculty member in the UO Ethnic Studies program, and their two baby boys. Fed up with what she perceives as blatant discrimination at the UO College of Education, Garcia has compiled a thick packet of student testimonies, meeting minutes, grievances and violated policies related to equality at the college. She presents the information like the school principal she is training to become: calmly but firmly, each point backed by fact, her outrage tempered by her warm smile.

Why did you contact EW?

I wanted the general public to know about the ongoing discrimination at the UO College of Education. The college trains teachers and school administrators, but they don't enforce their own diversity policy. This institution is heralded for providing amazing educators, but its administrators and faculty are harassing, marginalizing and violating the basic rights of students. The public has to know what's going on because it's going to damage their kids.



How did you find out about this?

I was hired to provide academic support to Native American graduate students in Teacher Education. But the students didn't need a lot of academic support; they needed support in dealing with the racism coming out of the College of Ed. They were encountering hostility from professors and colleagues, or they were placed in schools with cooperating teachers or supervisors who were discriminatory.

What sparked the most recent surge of racial tension at the College of Ed?

In February 2004, the college sponsored an education career conference. A human resource person was talking about what you need to do at a job interview: give a firm handshake, make eye-to-eye contact, be assertive. One of my students, who is Cherokee, raised her hand and said, "How culturally sensitive are you to people whose values don't reflect that? In my cul-

ture, those things are considered rude." He said, "Think of it as a blemish, like a big nose. Acknowledge it, get past it and show them the great teacher you can be." The whole room was up in arms.

What did that lead to?

A debate around diversity within College of Ed classrooms, and the professors were ill equipped to deal with it. One of my students was told by a supervisor, "Don't say anything about this or you will compromise your practicum placement and a job." It wasn't just about the student who raised the question; all the Indian students and other students of color were now having to deal with the repercussions of it being a public conversation.

Couldn't that same incident have opened the doors to a constructive conversation?

If it was a safe, well-mediated conversation, it would provide a rich discussion and lead to teachable moments. But with this heightened awareness about racial tensions in the classrooms, and professors ill equipped to handle the conversations, threats started coming down to the students of color. Professors allowed white students to not have to work with Indian students. That climate of segregation became the norm.

How has the community reacted?

A few years ago Jefferson Middle School

issued a boycott and said, "We will not take your practicum students from the College of Ed because they are culturally incompetent and are damaging our kids." We need more schools to follow their lead. More than 30 community groups, the Sapsik'walá [Native American teacher ed] students, the Ethnic Diversity Affairs Committee and Advocates for the Integration of Diversity in Education have come forward.

And the College of Education's response?

The college made a few concessions, but they were all ineffective. They hired a part-time ombudsperson, but he answers to the dean, and my students don't trust him. They hired a consultant to infuse diversity, but the lady didn't even know what cultural competency was. They hold faculty professional development seminars dealing with diversity and retaliation, but no one goes. There is an under-representation of students and faculty of color on the hiring committees. These aren't concessions that are made in good faith.

The college is committing a lot of money to make these reforms. Do you think that reflects a genuine concern, or are they trying to silence their critics?

Both. The College of Ed's concessions are very safe for them if the deans are on the committees that make the hiring and policy reform decisions. The college agrees that three very clear policies have been violated — the infusion of diversity policy, the Affirmative Action policy and the retaliation policy. These things aren't just happening to one or two people. The climate of fear is real.

Do you think that the discrimination is intentional?

The first time you hear about the problem and make an effort to fix it, that's free. Years of it? That spells out intention. If you pin it on one person, it doesn't get to the sophistication of racism. We can get rid of the dean, but who would be on the hiring committee to replace him? Not my face. Not a multicultural educator at the schools or the director of ethnic studies. The white, trained professionals, mostly men,

who are in these positions would make the decisions. That's what institutionalized racism is: The rules are set up to protect a white, elite institution.

You're describing a sort of malignant cancer, where you can cut out a tumor but the disease remains.

Unless we're given real input. We want a collaborative effort. People will scream at me and say, "I don't have time to listen to your diversity agenda." But it doesn't make any sense to say that cultural competence is not your agenda. It's *our* agenda, as teachers and administrators. It gives us the tools that are necessary to meet the needs of our students.

So what's next?

We've tried grievances, we've given presentations, we've had polite conversations, we've written letters. We've done all that, but none of the college's responses address the student climate now. So we're kicking it up a notch. We've written a letter with a list of demands and we will not take the pressure off until they address the real issues.

If you were making all the decisions, how would you fix this?

A collaborative effort with stakeholders who don't represent dominant culture, working together to change the institution to embrace equity and justice, would do it. It's about commitment and will. Our students are being expelled from high school for speaking Spanish. Students are being told, "Be quiet; you could get deported." These incidents are a direct result of teachers who are culturally incompetent. It leads to damaged self-esteem and the exacerbation of the achievement gap.

What should a well-intentioned but culturally incompetent teacher do?

I think great teachers need to know three things: their students, themselves, and their resources. If I want to be a good teacher to you, I need to understand that I'm looking at you through my lens. How have I been socially constructed to see you? If I don't have everything I need to help you achieve your highest potential, then I need to draw on all these resources that are out there. **EW**

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