

MINUTES

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT BOARD OF TRUSTEES COMMITTEE FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Meeting held by Telephone

February 23, 2022

Committee Trustees: Andrea Dennis-LaVigne, Andy Bessette, Charles Bunnell, Shari Cantor, Marilda Gandara, Bryan Pollard

Additional Trustees: Justin Fang, Noah Frank, Daniel Toscano

University Senate Representative: Maria-Luz Fernandez

University Staff: Michael Gilbert, Fany Hannon, Kathleen Holgerson, Neda Izadi, Carl Lejuez, Mona Lucas, Kaylee Jangula Mootz, Kelsey O'Neil, Willena Price, Jonelle Reynolds, Angela Rola, Rachel Rubin, Patrick Russell, Franklin Tuitt, Michael Vidal

University Students: Sage Phillips and Irene Soteriou

Other Attendees: Edina Oestreicher

Vice-Chair Dennis-LaVigne convened the Committee at 9:30 a.m.

- Public Participation

No members of the public who signed up to address the Committee.

APPROVAL ITEM:

- Minutes of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee Meeting of December 7, 2021

Trustee Pollard noted two typographical errors in the December 7, 2021, minutes. On a motion by Mr. Bunnell, seconded by Ms. Cantor, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of the December 7, 2021, meeting, as amended.

PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION ITEMS:

- Overview of UConn Cultural Centers

Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer Tuitt introduced the Office for Diversity and Inclusion's (ODI) team and highlighted the upcoming 50th anniversaries for both the Women's Center and the Puerto Rican / Latin American Cultural Center (PRLACC). He then introduced Angela Rola, Director, Asian American Cultural Center, who provided a brief overview of the history of cultural centers at UConn and highlighted the importance and dedication of both professional staff and student workers.

Director Rola corrected a common misperception that the cultural centers only serve students. While the collective missions of the cultural centers involve fostering graduate and undergraduate students' personal and academic growth, excellence, and leadership capabilities, they also play comprehensive roles in addressing campus climate. Some of those roles include working intentionally with corresponding studies institutes; facilitating pop-up courses on racism; working with offices across campus on policy issues; serving on University task forces and senate committees; helping recruit and retain faculty, staff, and students of color; community outreach; advocating for students concerning bias incidents and racism; and providing diversity-related training for faculty.

Trustee Bessette inquired about publicity to let the wider community know about the work of the cultural centers. Dr. Tuitt noted a new University-wide diversity website and a recent interview in UConn Today with Dr. Willena Price, Director, African American Cultural Center (AACC).

- Discussion of ODI Commons Space

Dr. Tuitt discussed the acquisition of a common space on the first floor of the Student Union, which will serve as the home for Middle Eastern Cultural Programs (MECP) and Native American Cultural Programs (NACP) and will also provide a multi-cultural multipurpose space for intergroup events, trainings, and guest lectures.

He pointed to research suggesting that such space provides places to heal and build community and increase the quality of the overall student experience. He articulated his belief that ODI Commons will increase UConn's attractiveness as a community outreach partner. He emphasized that ODI Commons will help provide greater support and resources for historically marginalized groups and will serve as a hub for conversations about the challenges UConn faces. He concluded by outlining staffing and budget needs, as well as renovation costs.

Trustee Bessette inquired about the budget, and Dr. Tuitt responded that the 2022-2023 budget was discussed with Interim President Agwunobi, Board Chair Toscano, and Vice-Chair Dennis-LaVigne.

- Student Presentations from Native American Cultural Programs & Middle Eastern Cultural Programs

Sage Phillips of the NACP and Irene Soteriou of the MECP outlined the histories and roles of their respective cultural programs, including making visible the experiences of the historically marginalized groups they serve; providing support, space, resources, and affinity-based groups to connect and process the issues specific to their unique experiences. Dr. Tuitt affirmed ODI's support for elevating these programs to centers.

Vice-Chair Dennis-LaVigne asked for the students' perspectives about sharing space. While the students noted logistical challenges, they expressed confidence in their ability to work together. University Senate Representative Fernandez asked how UConn could increase the number of historically marginalized cultural programs on campus. The students indicated the need for visible support and funding for such groups. Trustee Bunnell noted the importance of providing a safe and welcoming space for affinity-based groups on campus.

- Campus Climate Initiative

UConn Hillel Executive Director Oestreicher provided a brief overview of Jewish student life at UConn, as well as Hillel's role in serving Jewish students. She noted that UConn is one of the top universities for serving Jewish populations, with about 10% of the population identifying as Jewish. Hillel programming currently serves 600, a number they plan on doubling with recent grants.

Executive Director Oestreicher discussed the Campus Climate Initiative, a partnership between UConn, Hillel, and the Academic Exchange Network. In response to an uptick in antisemitic bias incidents at UConn, these groups partnered to review UConn's policies and procedures with the goal of ensuring a more inclusive and welcoming climate for Jewish students – and by extension – all UConn students. Some of this initiative's outcomes include reviewing and expanding trainings offered to students, staff, and administration; examining bias response protocols and improving communications, reporting, and accessibility of resources; and identifying challenges UConn faces while finding opportunities to strengthen existing programs and create new initiatives.

The Committee discussed the importance of 1-credit pop-up courses on racism and antisemitism and the value these hold for students.

- Adjournment

On a motion by Trustee Gandara, seconded by Trustee Cantor, the Committee voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting. The Committee meeting adjourned at 10:35 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Jonelle Reynolds, Ph.D.
Committee Secretary