

Graduating Students of Color Exit Interviews 2011

A report prepared by the

Committee on Intercultural and Global Understanding

February 22, 2012

This report summarizes student responses to questions asked during exit interviews of graduating students of color from the Class of 2011. All graduating students who self identified as students of color were invited to attend the exit interview sessions, and from there students self-selected to participate. Before the CIGU members began asking questions, each student was asked to introduce themselves and talk about how they chose to self identify. Winston Grady-Willis, Director of Intercultural Studies and CIGU chair, served as the facilitator, explaining that the goal of the group exit interview was to have students provide candid feedback about their experiences at Skidmore, particularly in relation to Goal II: Intercultural and Global Understanding. The facilitator explained that the intention, as was the case in previous years, was to summarize responses, protecting the anonymity of each student.

Two exit interview sessions took place on May 17, 2011, and each lasted two hours. Session 1 was attended by four students as well as CIGU members Herb Crossman, Winston Grady-Willis, Mariel Martin, and Dean Mendes. Session 2 was attended by eight students as well as CIGU members Winston Grady-Willis, Meg Hegener, and Mariel Martin. In terms of race and ethnicity, the 12 students self identified as African-American; Asian; Hispanic, black/white; Latino; multiracial (half-Japanese, half-white); Pilipino (a term, like Filipino, that refers to a person claiming heritage connected to the Philippine Islands); and South Asian. The groups included a mix of women and men, gay and straight.

Students were asked a series of questions (below) and Mariel Martin, Director of Student Diversity Programs, used digital recordings of the session to prepare transcripts of the group interviews. Information from both sessions was compiled into one document and edited for

loved the campus. I talked to a few professors, and I thought they were cool. So I ended up falling in love with the school, and I couldn't see myself anywhere else.

Student 2: Discovery Weekend also sold it for me. I hadn't visited the campus beforehand, but I knew it was a good institution academically and I knew it was where I wanted to be, but I wasn't sure if it was the right social scene for me. As soon as I got here, everyone was very welcoming. Everyone wanted to show me a good time – my hosts were great. The campus was really aesthetically pleasing, and there was just a generally good vibe from the school, so I was totally sold that day.

Student 3: Coming from the city [New York City], I really wanted to do something completely different. And when I applied to my schools, I thought I wanted to go to a big university, so I applied to big universities as well as small liberal arts colleges, but I was able to come up here in my junior year of high school. I really liked it. It's a lot different because it is predominantly white and I went to a predominately African-American and Latino school, and I was actually ready to come somewhere where I didn't have to, you know [inaudible]... And, I thought I was ready for that.

Student 1: I wasn't going to come to Skidmore because originally I was going to go to City College and my guidance counselor said, 'You are going here.' So I applied. And I got the acceptance letter on April 1, I remember, and I thought it was an April Fools kind of joke thing.

Student 5: Discovery Weekend when I came up, I was really unsure where I wanted to go. I met Mariel and other students, and I guess I just liked the small atmosphere of the school [and that] everyone knew each other.

Student 8: Throughout high school, I was part of a college prep program and the director focused a lot on applying to private liberal arts colleges because they have money to give us. I came up three times and enjoyed it. I got to see it in the fall when it was gloomy and in the spring when it was beautiful. I remember how the tour guide drives through the east side [of Saratoga Springs] and the race track, and I remember thinking, these houses are gorgeous. I am coming here.

Student 9: I remember being really surprised by the environment. I'm from [California], and I remember taking that bus and these houses are so different. I'll be honest. I had no idea what Skidmore College was. I don't think a lot of people on the west coast know about it. I got a letter from the [athletic] coach and I wasn't really considering it until I was talking to one of my friends about my letter. One of my teachers happened to pass by and said, 'Wow, Skidmore College is a really prestigious school out in the east. You should definitely think about that; I think it would be a good fit.' I came here on Discovery Weekend and it was a beautiful day. Everybody was outside, hanging out on the green. What I really liked about Skidmore was its atmosphere – everybody seemed so open. The [athletic] team also greeted me with open arms. They introduced me to all their friends. Right then, I knew this was the place for me. I didn't really think about any other colleges after that.

people who would stick together. Then I started wanting to do other things that were outside of our dorm group. I started to attend lectures and things that started talking about race more and more. One of the more painful experiences of my college career was being completely rejected when it came to anything race related because I was always talking about it. I was always the one who was discussing race. So I remember making a lot of friends I

Student 6: It's strange to think about how much your high school experience does affect your first-

the class.' It would be attributed to my race. That's even happened as late as last semester or this semester. There is this pressure when I raise my hand and I'm saying something, and if it's not the right thing that it's something attributed to my race. It makes it really difficult to be the only student of color in the classroom.

Student 3: I agree with you 100%. From when I first got here up until last semester, a lot of times I wouldn't raise my hand because I'd be the only student of color in the class. In more difficult classes, I definitely wouldn't participate because I felt I'm going to be judged and I won't say the right thing. I guess fear of what people might think, when you get in a classroom and you're the only student of color, and it's like all eyes on you, it's tough.

Student 4: It brings out all these insecurities.

Student 3: Yes, it does! Outside of the classroom, socially, I don't care what these people think about me. But in the classroom, it's totally different.

Student 2: I know for me the most uncomfortable experience I had was my first semester freshman year taking MB-107. There was a row of OP students and then everyone else in the class. My uncomfortableness came inside and outside the classroom. So many other students sounded like they have been doing business work their entire life, and they spoke eloquently and they really intimidated me to speak up in class because I didn't feel like what I had to contribute was as substantial as what they were saying. So I didn't participate very much in that class. I didn't feel very comfortable speaking out. While doing the group project, I was incredibly uncomfortable. I've never felt so silenced before because everything that I said, they would not really pay attention to. It was a really negative experience for me. That eventually deterred me away from the business major. I hate to stereotype, but there is a feeling of superiority and power in the business classes that I have taken or general lack of understanding of diversity in the classrooms that makes it really uncomfortable. Professors don't always address it appropriately. Being a Sociology major, I've had the opportunity to take amazing classes with amazing professors who have helped me understand myself and society in general. It's helped me come out of my shell and feel more comfortable speaking up. In particular, [SO-219] Race and Power class and [SW-212] Social Work Values and Populations at Risk were the two classes that opened my eyes to a lot and helped me be a lot more comfortable with myself.

Student 4: I've had weird issues with professors. I had one professor, and I was sitting in her office and we were having a conversation and she was looking at my degree audit and she said, "Oh, you're an OP student, but you're so smart." I was like, "What does that even mean?" She tried to save herself by saying, "I

professors about race

Student 5: I took [EN-105] Race, Writing & Difference and [SO-219] Race & Power.
The English professor's

when I came here I learned that these things can happen. It does make it more difficult, and it's sad that it had to happen this way. I'm at the end of my college career, and I don't even want to come back to Saratoga Springs after this.

Student 2: I know for me the OSDP clubs have been one of the most rewarding things I've done at Skidmore. One of the most difficult things for me these past four years is that one of the only times I practice my Spanish is when I speak to my parents. And over the course of four years, I've spoken it less and less. It's incredibly frustrating because how can I not speak to my own parents in the language that I knew before I knew English? But through Raices, it's been a space for me where I can rekindle with that part of my culture and connect with people who are not only part of it, but are interested in it. It's been fun going through the creative process of trying to come up with general meeting ideas and getting speakers to come. It's allowed me to grow as a person and as a leader tremendously. It's something that I value a lot and I'm sad to leave it. I know that I played an important role being a part of it and that really defined my college experience in a lot of ways.

Student 3: I think I've learned more about my culture being here than back home. I grew up in a predominately black neighborhood. How do you learn more here? I think it's because you want to teach other people about your culture. I'm glad that I did [the student club] for as long as I did, but it's just

Student 8: I did a project, two years ago, examining race in Saratoga Springs. At the time, I was angry and felt a certain way about Skidmore and about how no one wanted to discuss social identities. That project helped me to understand it's not only Skidmore, but the community as well, and it does have an influence on the college campus. So it made me stop pointing the finger at Skidmore as a whole saying 'You guys suck' or 'You're not trying.' I was able to understand in the larger perspective that this is what's going on.

Student 6: I've been focused on race issues for such a long time that I had a hard time looking critically at class issues. I've been uncomfortable, racially, not being in a racially diverse area. I knew that I was getting a great scholarship to come here in comparison to

Question 6: Have you witnessed changes here in terms of the way Skidmore approaches issues of diversity, and if so, what are they?

Student 1: The one thing I really enjoyed this year was the Intersections [program]. The only negative side of that is that I wish the participation we got at Cornell West was the same at the other programs.

Student 2: The Sexual Misconduct Policy was really critical and definitely needed. I think when we talk about diversity, some things get overlooked, like gender identity and expression. I've always been interested in how powerful the LGBT movement has been with creating the gender neutral bathrooms in Case, in Wiecking, and around campus. I think that was pretty incredible because I heard about the push back from it and why it makes people uncomfortable, but for the school to respond so quickly – well, I don't know if they responded quickly. But those strides are positive.

Question 7: Please provide recommendations or suggestions on what, concretely, should change institutionally in terms of issues of diversity?

Summary: Several students suggested several curricular change, including incorporating a diversity-related component or an IGR course into the First-Year Experience. Students highlighted the need for more faculty of color, and they also suggested rethinking events like Discovery Tour and the Students of Color Welcome Dinner during new student orientation. Some students expressed negative views of the segregation associated with these programs.

Student 4: I think there should be a race course that's a component of FYE. I think first year students should be forced to take a course where they talk about race. I feel like when they take that course and develop that vocabulary, they are going to be more willing to have those conversations. I think until you do that, people are going to stick to what they know and stay away from [talking about race]. I know it's hard to come up with professors and getting that approved, but the impact that would have on student relations would be incredible.

Student 3: I agree. IGR was so great. It would be great if all of those classes could be the first-year seminar. That would be amazing for the students to have that when they come in. Making them take that first thing as opposed to once during your four years because then people wait until the last minute to take it. I think that would be perfect.

Student 1: Restructuring the Cultural Diversity and Non-Western courses.

Student 2: I think they should be expanded to other courses like gender, making it so it has to be taken within the first two years. Exposing students to issues earlier helps to give them the vocabulary to talk about these issues. Also, the school needs to hire more faculty of color. That's an obvious one. I think people don't see it as such a prominent problem as I think it is. It's a problem when you want to talk about certain issues, but you don't want to overburden the faculty of color who are already here. It limits who you can talk to. If I want to talk to a Hispanic professor, who am I going to talk to? There are no

Hispanic professors except if you are in the Foreign Languages department [or taking classes one or two other subjects].

Student 1: It hurts when you meet a faculty of color and they just leave. Like I took a class with [an American Studies Professor] and I really liked the guy, and the next thing I know, he's gone.

Student 5: I feel like the community wasn't as separated during my freshman year. There were problems, but everyone dealt with them together. There is a huge divide and not as many people in the middle. Maybe I feel that way because I'm more aware and entrenched. I don't remember a Bias Response Group, but I see that more, so that is good.

Student 6: That's the only thing I can really think of too. Maybe it's because I've gotten more involved, but the bias response started off with occasional reports and now there are so many more substantial reports.

Student 10: From my freshman year, race is more of an issue. There is still an inability for institutional change because a lot of the diversity programs are long-term processes. Compton's got muddled and that's not good.

Student 7: I see improvements in transparency. I wonder if I just know more because I'm more involved, I

Student 11: I feel like Discovery Weekend is trying too hard to be inclusive, like, if you are a student of color, come this weekend. The Students of Color Dinner [during new student orientation] is a way for the school to say that you care so much. The school is trying too hard. If we are so much about accepting diversity, I don't know if things like that – the 'you are a student of color and you should hang out with a student of color to feel accepted' – should happen. I definitely feel there is fine line though.

Student 7: I've seen situations where that kind of attention to a particular group stirs resentment in another. But, I recognize the need for space and a place where people can go to feel comfortable.

Question 8: Would you now recommend Skidmore College to high school students?

Summary: The attendees, some with words of caution, indicated that they would recommend Skidmore to others.

Student 4: I had an incredible experience. I loved Skidmore. I had an amazing time. I would definitely recommend it.

Student 2: I love this school. I wouldn't do anything if I had no feelings toward the institution. I definitely do recommend Skidmore to people, but I do it with an air of caution. I let people know this is a great place, but you may experience x, y, and z, and here is how I think you can deal with it. I think the worst thing is when people try to sweep it under the rug and pretend it's not an issue. And then people get blindsided. If you prepare someone with the reality of *what could happen*, then if something does happen they can respond more appropriately to it.

Student 4: I think what we experience here, we can experience all over the country. You can experience it anywhere and if you can experience it with all the good things that come with Skidmore, then yes.

Student 3: I would definitely recommend this school to other people, especially to people who are from where I'm from. Skidmore has a lot of potential to do better. This was a really tough year for us, and I feel likd ' l schoo

about themselves. I loved it in many ways, but I hated it in so many other ways. For me, if I were to be recommending it to someone who wants to be at a place where they can be themselves and be comfortable at every stage of their life, to be able to talk about what they want to talk about and have a diverse group of friends, then I don't think this is the place for them – which sucks. At the same time, I'm not going to say that in the end to someone because maybe a smaller institution and maybe predominantly white is ok with them, or maybe a state school is better for them. I thought about, if I'm going to go back to school, I can't be at a small liberal arts school in a small town. I would be able to recommend this school to someone who's looking for something more academically creative. Socially it's a good place, too. It has a lot of interesting people and definitely caring people. But when it comes to caring about social identity issues, I think there aren't many in this community.

Student 8: What I've disliked about Skidmore has challenged me. I think I've grown from that. Due to that, I would want to do it again and I would want someone else to do it – at least if I'm thinking about someone who is very similar to the person I was at eighteen coming in here. I would not take anything back. God knows how many times I've said the “f-word” to Skidmore, but saying that has taught me and it's made me who I am today.

Student 7: I think the struggle has been...[well] you wouldn't think it would be as hard. It's not supposed to be this hard. I've never been in a place where I felt completely comfortable talking about anything about myself, so this is reality for me. Being here at Skidmore has been my life. That's just reality. That's taught me how to cope with reality. The struggle has helped me grow and given me the tools and given me the experiences to deal with it in the future. I mean, that's reality. That's what we are going to continue dealing with for the rest of our lives.

Student 8: If we went to a state school, we'd probably blend in, and here one of the main issues or topics has always been about how we stand out. Whether you want to believe it or not, you are [going to stand out]. Even if you don't address it yourself or you don't acknowledge it, someone else will.

Student 5: I would absolutely recommend Skidmore. For the most part, Skidmore allows you to blaze your own path and to be yourself and you can take that in any direction you want. And yeah, for people of color and other minority groups, it is a lot more difficult just because you have these societal pressures. But I think for the most part, if you want to get somewhere at Skidmore, you can definitely cut down those trees and make that

Student 4: I'm so glad that I came to Skidmore at the time that I did. The group of people