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## Saint Mary's Students Demand More Diversity

By Sophie Braccini



Questioning the world is at the core of a college student's life. Part of that involves questioning authority, often beginning with peaceful protests like the "End the Silence" protest held May 5 at Saint Mary's College where over 100 students, along with some sympathetic professors, participated in a series of events across the Moraga campus to express their concerns about a lack of diversity at the college.

SMC reports that 46.9 percent of admitted freshman in 2015 were white, 25 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 6.3 percent African-American. The college website indicates that SMC is ranked No. 116 in ethnic diversity nationwide, with a diverse student body that is far above the national average.

Saint Mary's College students taped mouths with the slogan #EndtheSilence at a May 5 protest. Photo Andy Scheck

The protesting students developed a long list of demands to the college's board of trustees that included encouraging donors to create more

scholarships for incoming marginalized, low-income, undocumented, and first-generation students; hiring permanent bilingual staff; developing a policy for the retention of underrepresented faculty; requiring that all students take a diversity course; requiring that public safety improve their relations and stop persecuting students of color; and creating an annual plan of action about how the college will improve the experience of marginalized students.

"The college is a microcosm of society, and there are differences on the campus, just like there are on all campuses across the nation," said Saint Mary's College President Jim Donahue. "Now, are we where we need to be when it comes to inclusive community? The recent protest indicates that we need to do more to affirm our students and we will do better; going forward as one community." He added that he was proud of the students for standing up for what they believe in. "We teach our students to raise their voices when they perceive something is not right and it is not surprising when they practice what they have learned," Donahue added.

Evette Castillo Clark, Saint Mary's dean of students, said the demonstration was a major call to action. "We have to take these demands and work together with all stakeholders on the campus, with students at the table, to make progress," she said.

During a brown bag lunch session at the Intercultural Center with Donahue, audience members, who were mostly minority students, explained how they felt marginalized and not supported enough by the college. They also questioned the content of some classes, such as Collegiate Seminar, that predominantly references Western thinkers as the source of reflection.

African-American students, Latino students, Asian students, and students of Middle-eastern origin expressed their dismay at being "tokenized" by the majority of white students. Many expressed a desire for the faculty to be more diverse. One Filipina student said having a role model from her culture teaching at the college would help her feel that she could "make it" in higher education.

"We recognize that all students thrive when they have role models and mentors with whom they

feel a connection," Donahue acknowledged. "Currently there's a faculty senate task force on hiring black and African-American faculty that will make recommendations before the fall 2016 term. Additionally, the college is establishing standards and policies to recruit and mentor new and diverse faculty."

Many students at the brown bag luncheon said fellow students were ignorant of foreign cultures, and that the college was doing nothing to address it. Some white students who joined the protesting group also asked for more diversity.

"We plan to implement inclusive academic programing and student support programs, including mandated student, faculty and staff orientations and workshops on inclusion, diversity and the fundamental expectation of respect for all persons and civility on our campus," said Donahue. The president was aware of acts of racism that had happened on campus and stated that bigotry or bias toward any community member, or visitor, was simply unacceptable at Saint Mary's.

A few teachers came to support the outcry, putting tape over their mouths emblazoned with the slogan #EndTheSilence. One of them said that the minority problem at Saint Mary's is recurrent, that protests erupt about every five years and that the college listens, but never addresses the core issue.

Donahue does not agree. He recognizes that change is not easy, but that the work Saint Mary's has been doing on becoming a more inclusive community in many ways for some time now is profound. In his response to the students, Donahue confirmed that the dialogue with them will continue.

"Our work is real, collaborative and far from superficial," he said.



Students wrote their messages on butcherpaper.

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