

The Measure of Diversity

Lin Sakamoto and Brendan McNerney

Describing the student population at Loyola in the period leading up to the merger of 1973, Father Michael Engh, a former Dean, Professor, and undergraduate at LMU stated succinctly:

“There were very few students of color at the time.”

In 1973, Loyola University and Marymount College came together to form what is now the largest Roman Catholic University on the West Coast. While the successful integration of male and female coeds was a major accomplishment for the institution, LMU would continue to struggle over the next four decades with ethnic and racial diversity. If the pre-merger story of diversity is largely one of the “open door” policy and memorable “firsts,” the post-merger story features the challenge to create meaningful inclusion. More specifically, an inclusion measured not just in numbers, but also by the Jesuit notions of social justice and the education of the whole person. Summarizing the centrality of such notions of diversity to Jesuit higher education, former President Father Lawton notes that it is “not simply to make the numbers look good . . . but we really try actively to encourage people to learn from each other and to respect each other.”

The application of these Jesuit ideals in the post-merger period fell to President Merrifield, who from 1969-1984 became renowned for his efforts to diversify the campus. Father Engh remembered that Father Merrifield felt not enough was being done to actively encourage more diversity on campus. According to Father Engh, Father Merrifield “made it a priority to begin diversifying the student population and providing the financial aid to make that possible.” Father Merrifield set the pattern that was to be followed by successive presidents: Father Loughran, Father O’Malley, and Father Lawton. Explaining the centrality of this commitment over time, Father Engh succinctly noted that “. . .to fulfill the mission of Loyola Marymount meant that we had to be sensitive to and inclusive of issues of diversity.” Engh continued, “It’s rooted in who we are as a Catholic school.”

At LMU, the active focus on diversity translates in many different ways. As Professor Arthur Gross-Schaefer, Chair of the Marketing and Business Law Department recounted, “. . .when I came to LMU one of my concerns was as, at that time, a Rabbinic student—or a soon—to-be Rabbinic student, would LMU be a safe place, a welcoming place. . .” Explaining why he chose to stay at LMU for 30 years, Professor Gross-Schaefer states: “I don’t feel excluded. I’ve never felt anti-Semitism here. I’ve felt people not understanding what it means to be Jewish, but never anti-Semitism. I’ve felt very included.” Summarizing how inclusion has helped to define the University, Professor Gross-Schaefer notes “I felt . . . that this is a place that honors learning, honors the individual, honors diversity.”

Alumnus Tamika Lang, who was an undergraduate in the late 1990s, similarly related her positive experiences at LMU. Her high school was generally split between African American and Latino students, so coming to LMU where the African American student population was 8% was a drastic change for her. Yet, she remembered, “it was amazing how much people worked together even though you might be the only African American student in your class. . . There was still inclusiveness despite those differences.” Lang continued, “. . .of course, there’s always going to be issues when you bring . . . so many different people together. But I think the University was generally concerned and interested in making things work for everyone. And I think that goes back to the social justice mission of the campus.”

The Measure of Diversity

Lin Sakamoto and Brendan McNerney

In the period since the merger, diversity, educating the whole person, and issues of social justice have informed the creation of ethnic studies programs as well as resident houses. For example, Alumnus Ernesto Colin related how special it was to him that “LMU [had] one of the original Chicano Studies programs in all the nation...” Colin explained, “I knew that I wanted to be [a Chicano Studies Major] from high school. The first class I ever took at LMU was Chicano Studies...It was my passion...” Similarly, the creation of LMU’s Intercultural House was, according to Tamika Lang, an attempt “to bring different cultures together to talk about different issues...” Lisa Piumetti Farland recalls her experiences with the cultural organizations on campus during her undergraduate years in the 1980s. Farland explained that the presence of these organizations on campus and their respective celebratory events allowed an individual unfamiliar to their cultures to learn. “There was great opportunity for that insight,” Farland recollects.

While tremendous strides have been made towards creating a more diverse campus, there have also been significant shortcomings. Since the 1973 merger, individual recollections, external historical events, and on-campus incidents have combined to remind us how creating meaningful inclusion can be a complicated, and sometimes conflicted, process. In the 1970s, Jose Legaspi remembered facing negative comments as a Mexican student on campus. As Legaspi remembered, “so people would make fun of me, some snotty remarks, or they would—just because I was in class and they would say, ‘oh, he’s here only at Loyola because he’s Mexican.’ And I would sort of hear those kinds of comments.” But Legaspi also remembered that Father Merrifield “was always prodding for action from us. I had not realized how strongly he felt about the underrepresented minorities—I mean, he was way ahead of his time...” According to Alex Chaves, who was an undergraduate in the mid-1980s, LMU was not “that ethnically diverse at the time.” Yet, Chaves continued, “being Hispanic I never felt like I was an outsider; that wasn’t the case. But thinking about it I remember it being predominantly white...” And as late as the 1990s, Renata Simril, LMU Alumnus and co-founder of the African American Alumni Association, stated that “...the two groups that I probably recall seeing most on campus were Latino students and white students. And there would be the handful of African Americans and Pacific Islanders and Asians. But [for] the most part, it was primarily white and Latino when I was going to school here.” However, Simril also notes that LMU has been “very consistent and committed to making sure that this is as diverse and open a campus as possible.”

External historical events have also complicated the Jesuit vision of diversity and inclusion. In the early 1990s, the city of Los Angeles was rocked by the assault on Rodney King. Response to the beating and subsequent acquittal of police officers charged in the incident, included riots in the greater Los Angeles area as well as heightened racial tensions that spread to the campus. Frances Young, who graduated in 1994, recalls what it was like to be a student at LMU amidst such chaos. With Inglewood to the east of the Manchester campus entrance, the National Guard and L.A.P.D. were “...making a tremendous effort to make sure no rioting and looting crossed Manchester and Sepulveda... [which] was the demarcation line...” Students were, according to Young, “being told [not to] leave campus.” The problem was that many students in the Black Student Union and MEChA “had relatives who lived in the areas not being protected.” This created significant stress for these students who, worried about the safety of their families, asked to be excused from final exams. As Young explains, this request led to racial tensions on campus as students who were not directly impacted by the upheavals became

The Measure of Diversity

Lin Sakamoto and Brendan McNerney

increasingly resentful. According to Young, “that was the source of the racial tension that exploded into a demand from students [for finals to] be cancelled...” When the administration, under President Father O’Malley, denied their requests, “somewhere between five hundred and a thousand students brought their sleeping bags and . . . blocked the entrance and the exit for about two, maybe two-and-a-half days.” Young was among the few representing the protesting students who worked with the university for a solution to the conflict. According to Young, “the compromise was if you would like to take the grade you’ve earned thus far, you can have it and you can leave. If you, for whatever reason, don’t want to . . . take the grade you’ve earned thus far . . . then you should take your exam.”

The 1990s also marked several of the most infamous on-campus incidents regarding racism. When a racial epitaph was scrawled on the Lion’s Lair, Renata Simril approvingly described the University’s reaction: “One, getting that off and then, really addressing it from a community perspective was very swift, and very, I think appropriate, to say that we are very inclusive of all students here. The BSU and ASLMU really came together around that issue and it dissipated pretty quickly.” Tamika Lang recalled another situation involving racial slander at the coffee cart located adjacent to Foley Pond. Known as the Zebra Cart incident, it involved one of the workers at the cart calling an African American student the ‘N-word.’ The campus reaction to this incident was tremendous. “[Not] only was ASLMU involved but . . . a lot of [our] student organizations were having rallies,” Lang explained, “. . . that’s why it’s no longer the Zebra Cart . . . they ended up firing that individual [who] wasn’t [even] an LMU student. It was someone from the outside.”

Clearly, such incidents from just a few short decades ago demonstrate that the development of meaningful inclusion and diversity is a work in progress. Yet, while imperfect, it is progress. The impact of the Jesuit’s consistent efforts is evident. Father Engh recalls his time as a student in the 1970s “[where] it was a largely white campus with some African-Americans, some Latinos, some Asians. Now it’s far more diverse and . . . consistently 40% or more of the students are students of color.” Alex Chaves notes that “when I was here [in the 1980s] . . . there was only about . . . 5% to 7% Hispanics and now we’re up to 21%.” In fact, almost 47% of the fall 2010 undergraduate student population at LMU is made up of students of color. As Professor Gross-Schaefer states: “I think we’re doing pretty good . . . diversity is critical . . . when we hire people, we want people of different color, we want people of different gender and different religious traditions as part of our hiring panel and I like that. Same thing with our students, I like that as well. We want to understand that this is a multi-cultural, international, diverse world and we’re honoring that with how we’re hiring and the students we’re bringing in.” According to Alumnus and current Associate Head Coach of Women’s Basketball, Lynn Flanagan, diversity is “something that LMU has really focused on.” Flanagan notes that “[the diversity today has] been a great change . . . something that, as someone who has to recruit kids to this campus for [the basketball] team, it’s something that makes us unique in this conference.”

But at LMU, the numbers tell only part of the story. Here, the Jesuit notions of social justice and the education of the whole person require more. Lisa Farland, who since graduating from LMU in 1987, has worked in Admissions and the Office of Alumni Affairs, describes the University’s ongoing vision for diversity in the following terms: “My experiences [as an undergraduate] were good, positive, but we weren’t anywhere near as diverse as we are now.

The Measure of Diversity

Lin Sakamoto and Brendan McNerney

I'm really proud of where the University is today and I understand the commitment that it takes ...to continue to make that something that we aspire to be." Similarly, the on-going nature of this process is summarized by Father Lawton. When asked what grade he would give LMU for diversity, Father Lawton responded "incomplete." He went on to explain: "That's what I would give because you know in diversity it's never done. And I say [that] because it's about learning from one another, we can always do that better....[And] we have to keep working at it all the time." Indeed, almost 40 years after the merger, and 100 years after its inception, this institution continues in its journey, one measured not just in numbers but in the ideal of learning and respect.