



Building community through cultural literacy

June 14, 2021

By Southern Oregon University

"The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission's Cultural Literacy Series has provided eight personal lived experiences responding to Irene Kai's first article ending with, "Let's get to know each other." We now focus on organizations within our community for their approach to Cultural Literacy. We begin with Southern Oregon University." [Ashland Culture of Peace Commission](#)

Southern Oregon University is committed to working collaboratively with the city of Ashland and its residents to create a more welcoming, inclusive, peaceful community. This column highlights some of the work in progress on campus and sets the stage for continued learning and improvement.

SOU developed a new strategic plan in 2017 and 2018, based upon a clear articulation of shared institutional values and designed to achieve a vision of becoming "an inclusive, sustainable university for the future." The plan guides the day-to-day operations and shapes the university's aspirations.

One of the plan's seven strategic directions is specifically devoted to underscoring the university's commitment to creating "a diverse, equitable, inclusive community where all learners flourish." This strategic direction is built upon programs already in place at SOU and inspired the creation of several others.

Some of SOU's existing programs include Konaway Nika Tillicum, a summer program for Native American students in grades 7-12; Latino/a/x youth programs such as Academia Latina, the Cesar E. Chavez Leadership Conference, and Pirates/Bulldogs/Hornets to Raiders; and Success at Southern, a federally funded program serving primarily first-generation and low-income students.

Several centers exist to support particular student populations. The SOU Social Justice and Equity Center provides advocacy, education and community building that centers on the needs of Students of Color, queer and trans students, women and femmes, and sustains a supportive community space for all students. This new center — created in 2019 — is

intended to create synergy among students and incorporates the Multicultural Resource Center, Women's Resource Center, Queer Resource Center and Veteran's Resource Center.

There are also a number of student unions that offer care and support for students from diverse backgrounds. These include the Latino Student Union, Black Student Union, Native American Student Union, Asian Student Union, Ho'opa'a Hawai'i Club and the International Student Union.

New initiatives at SOU include the hiring of an executive-level professional focused on equity, diversity and inclusion. Outreach is also occurring with Oregon's Native American Tribes to learn how SOU can best serve their communities.

During the last year, the university worked to ensure compliance with House Bill 2864. This bill, passed in 2017, requires each of the state's seven public universities and 17 community colleges to implement cultural competency standards. Cultural competence is defined by the law as an understanding of how individuals can interact with all others respectfully and effectively, recognizing their value and preserving their dignity. SOU is in compliance and will provide ongoing training to continually develop and enhance the cultural competence of its employees.

Compliance is not enough, however, and SOU will continue to promote an anti-racist, welcoming campus. One way to do so is through education and training. All employees, for instance, are required to complete a series of online training sessions on the topics of diversity and inclusion, implicit bias and microaggression, sexual harassment prevention and creating a safe environment for LGBTQ+ students. All members of the campus community are also encouraged to participate in an educational series that explores institutionalized racism, the history of white supremacy, the reality of immigrants in our nation, indigeneity and the experiences and narratives of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and LGBTQ+ individuals.

SOU faculty are also revising the general education curriculum for all students. If approved, this new curriculum will require students to develop the capacity to engage in a lifelong, intentional and continuous process of learning culturally affirming ways of being, interacting and behaving that contribute to equitable living outcomes in both global and local communities.

In spite of the work completed and the support systems that are in place, some abhorrent incidents of racist, anti-Semitic, white supremacist graffiti have occurred on campus during the past year. These incidents underscore that the work taking place on the SOU campus is a start and that it must continue. The lines between campus and the community are porous, and students should feel safe on campus as well as in the city's grocery stores, restaurants, parks and outlying areas. SOU looks forward to working with all members of the Ashland community to create the diverse and welcoming community we all desire.