

Hey Cal Poly Humboldt!

Hope all are well.

At the beginning of this year, in my first chair's report for the September 7th meeting, I asked that we collaboratively commit to transparency, democracy, and kindness. I wanted to do a quick check in on our progress towards those aims at slightly past the halfway point of the year. Most of what I'm going to offer is anecdotal, but I think it's important we acknowledge and celebrate the moments when things feel like they are shaping up the way we aspire to.

I'll start with transparency. A week ago Interim VP Fisher brought his proposed campus message regarding budget updates and an upcoming hiring chill to a number of representatives of campus constituencies via email, and then to SenEx for discussion prior to publication of the document. A week prior to that, VP Holliday reached out to representatives of campus constituencies by phone as it became apparent that the mold growth in Campus Apartments necessitated relocating the students in those housing units. Somewhere around the same time, the committee working on the draft of our WASC self study document worked at length to determine the most inclusive means of garnering feedback prior to rolling out a more complete draft to the campus.

While all three of these examples might seem trivial from the perspective of a consistently interpersonally trusting campus (like, "why are you celebrating things working the way they should, generally?"), in light of where we were when we started this academic year, they feel like a big deal to me. Having a chance to talk about these impactful things prior to getting word of them in a campus wide blast or through the rumor mill feels good. I appreciate those who are committing to modelling transparency in our business processes, and acknowledge that doing so adds work to their plates and takes time from their respective schedules. What I hope is that, through this modelling, we get to a place where accessible information sharing and consultative deliberation is so reflexive and commonplace across campus that it feels like a consistent norm.

Similarly, in terms of democratic engagement, I want to speak to the recent Community Conversations, sponsored by the Campus Climate and Well-Being Stewards, and conducted in conjunction with the Student Athlete Advisory Committee, Associated Students, the University Senate, Staff Council, and broader community members in the Library. As a "Steward", I've been working with elected representatives of each of the above listed organizations to figure out how best to interface with their constituencies regarding the Campus' Protest Response in April of 24.

We spent a long time (maybe too long? I can talk too much in meetings sometimes...) figuring out what these conversations would look like, and, in keeping with any collaborative project, I don't think any of us were 100% confident that what we ended up doing was "right". We received meaningful feedback from SenEx and the Senate regarding these designs, much of which we were able to accommodate prior to the meetings, and some of which we continue to mull and worry about.

Which is all to say, I was probably as skeptical as anyone else regarding the efficacy of these events going into them, and I still harbor concerns about how best to improve our processes going forward so as to avoid causing harm. In spite of my doubts and hesitancy, I am a full-throated convert, in that, regardless of design flaws, these conversations were impactful and important. Brilliant colleagues volunteered their time as table leaders in these spaces to create small group contexts in which people could honestly and openly reflect on their experiences and express themselves. In these groups, listening to our students, our staff, our faculty, we heard stories of individual pain and systemic failure that had become abstracted by detachment and time. We heard our community say in multiple voices “I was scared/I’m still scared”, “I was abandoned without resources”, and perhaps most jarringly, “I don’t feel safe to express myself on this campus”. While hearing these perspectives voiced cannot be the conclusion of this process of introspection and community investigation, the time spent listening and talking was personally meaningful and affecting to me and others who needed to hear these things.

I describe these events in relation to democracy for two reasons. First, I appreciate how many folk with disparate and dissenting viewpoints came together to talk about a hard thing. This, in and of itself, was something. Second, we are just starting to figure out how to unpack, understand, archive, and legislate, not only regarding the events of last Spring, but also in regards to emerging injustices we have to prepare ourselves to confront together. There is still a lot of work to be done, and we need to provide each other input and guidance on how to do that work. Please, talk to us (not just the Stewards, or the Senate, but whoever your trusted representative might be) and tell us how we can do better, how we can move towards mutual trust. Email me (or whoever) and tell us who we should meet with next, what format we should pursue, what unanswered questions you have, and how we should begin to analyze and disseminate findings. Help us, critique us, inform us, so that this process is actually inclusive and democratic.

Finally, in terms of kindness, I have been inspired by the laudable care for each other in the last several weeks. I am so excited about the work being done to develop and roll out our Dreamer and LGBTQIA+ centers, and the much needed support that these spaces will provide. I can’t wait to engage with the “Forest of Caring” project that colleagues are developing across campus. Finally, I have been struck by the seemingly heartfelt desire to build trust across constituencies on campus. I don’t know how trust (an ephemeral feeling) can be definitely achieved, but I think if we continue to pursue it in good faith, to articulate our needs, and to care about meeting those needs, that might be a good start.

This was a long, fluffy one, sorry y’all,  
jim