V. Focus Groups

A total of 12 focus groups – led by external facilitators – were conducted (see table 16). The eight involving students had 43 participants; 12 participated in the staff focus group and six people participated in the faculty groups.

Table 16. Focus Group Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Held</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number Signed Up</th>
<th>Number in Attendance</th>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/17/2016</td>
<td>International Students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/18/2016</td>
<td>Landscape Architecture; Behavior, Education, and Communications; &amp; Environmental Informatics</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/22/2016</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/22/2016</td>
<td>Students of Color</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/23/2016</td>
<td>Non-Traditional Students</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/23/2016</td>
<td>Ph.D. Students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/24/2016</td>
<td>Environmental Justice; Conservation Ecology</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/26/2016</td>
<td>Environmental Policy and Planning; Sustainable Systems</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/8/2016</td>
<td>Staff Focus Group</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/9/2016</td>
<td>Faculty Focus Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/9/2016</td>
<td>Research Scientist Focus Group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/16/2016</td>
<td>Postdoctoral Fellows Focus Group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus groups examined the following themes:
1. Perceptions of diversity in SNRE
2. The role of diversity in recruitment and enrollment
3. The climate in SNRE, and
4. Support and mentorship.

Focus group participants identified and discussed several major topics; these are listed below.

Master’s and Doctoral Students

Theme #1: Perceptions of Diversity in SNRE

- Depending on the track, students felt that diversity was “discussed a lot” or was perceived to be “extracurricular.”
- Students acknowledged that some of the recent guest lectures have included “a diversity component.” The School’s MLK Day event featuring the first African American president of the Sierra Club, is one notable example.
Theme # 2: Recruitment and Enrollment

- Students shared a range of impressions and experiences related to recruitment at SNRE.
  - Some students were pleased with the financial aid package they received.
  - A student recalled that SNRE seemed to make a “concerted effort to help people’s decision-making process” by providing access to resources and people to speak with as well as a user-friendly website.
  - Waiving the application fee for low-income students was helpful.

- However, some students reported that they didn’t “feel” particularly “recruited” by SNRE, noting that there was actually minimal communication with the department beyond submitting the application.

- Some students felt comfortable reaching out to faculty and described these interactions in a range of ways, from “positive” to “not anything spectacular” or “above and beyond.”

- Students of color indicated that particular faculty members – primarily faculty members of color – were making the largest effort to reach out to them.

- Generally, campus Visit Day was a positive experience for the students who were able to attend.
  - Some wished there was more “mixing across tracks.”
  - A student who identified as LGBTQ and from a low socioeconomic background noted that the “structure didn’t allow” for opportunities to interact with students with similar backgrounds or shared identities.
  - This seemed to be important for students of color, who given there are so few of them, are less likely to interact with each other because they tend to be spread out across the tracks.
  - Focus group participants suggested that Visit Day could have more structured and less “free-forming” opportunities to meet both prospective and currently enrolled students.

- Ph.D. students also expressed concerns about Visit Day.
  - Doctoral students indicated that the fact that there was no Visit Day or orientation specifically for Ph.D. students negatively impacted their admissions experience and made it difficult for them to find a community.
  - They explained that SNRE had invited them to the master’s students’ Visit Day but Ph.D. students have different needs so they really need Ph.D.-specific programming.
  - They were clear that a Ph.D. Visit Day could be more modest than the master’s one, but something would be helpful.
  - Without a Visit Day, doctoral students are left to orient themselves with limited success.
SNRE’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan - 2016

- Some students felt that diversity was not given the importance it deserved in SNRE.
- Some felt that micro-aggressions were occurring in the School.
- Some also wanted to see greater cultural sensitivity in SNRE.
- Some felt the existence of the environmental justice program mitigated the challenges with diversity and is a magnet for students. According to one student, “EJ was what drew me in.”
- Some participants indicated that when they were recruited they were led to believe that SNRE was very diverse, but when they arrived they were confronted with a different reality.
  - There also appeared to be a disjuncture between the diversity of students who showed up for the campus Visit Day and those who decided to enroll.
- Without a dedicated staff person to assist with diverse recruitment, students consistently said that a lot of that work was being put on the students of color.
- Students felt the recruitment of international students was improving but felt that this should not supplant efforts to enhance domestic racial and socioeconomic diversity.

Theme #3: Climate

- Students had varied experiences with the climate and the support and mentorship they received in SNRE.
  - They felt it depended a lot on the advisor, track, or lab.
  - Students described a number of experiences where they felt they were well supported and mentored by the school.
  - Some students described the climate at SNRE as “generally positive” and “friendly.”
- However, students expressed several concerns related to the school’s climate.
  - These concerns focused on:
    - the prominence of white masculine heteronormativity within SNRE,
    - conflicts in classroom,
    - the need for more inclusive pedagogies.18

- teaching and advising,
- voicing concerns, and
- GSI hiring.

- Students in several of the focus groups discussed the calendar that the school made last year portraying (mostly) white men wearing plaid.
  - While there was some agreement that the calendar was generally good spirited, some students felt that the calendar highlighted several exclusionary aspects of the SNRE culture.

- Students often reported not knowing about any SNRE efforts to help underrepresented students in the school, and seeking to help all students to feel included.
  - One consequence of this was that many students did not feel included and welcomed in the school.

- Participants in all the focus groups noted that SNRE was not an inclusive environment for all students—particularly international students.
  - Students observed that while SNRE sponsors a Chinese New Year’s celebration, interactions between international and domestic students are quite “limited” perhaps due to “language barriers” in some instances.

- Students reflected on the disadvantages that international students face in the way grades are assigned and the ways in which English language proficiency can impact scores.
  - Participants described the delicate nature of cross-cultural relations and the way in which well-intentioned actions can be misconstrued.
  - Some international students feel they are often blamed for any challenges they experience.

- Students discussed the possibility of having some type of “buddy system” throughout the year to encourage integration with domestic and international students.
  - Some suggested creating a “buddy moment” during Visit Day and/or orientation could help set the tone for an inclusive environment and help students build community before they enroll.

- Participants in several of the focus groups commented on the lack of diversity among faculty and staff.

- In class and other spaces, students of color indicated that they felt like they had to be the “spokesperson” for diversity or all people of color.

- Students of color described seeking out advisors who were also people of color, and those relationships were often quite strong. The students noticed that the students of color in the school tended to be mentored by the faculty of color.

- Doctoral students have formed a new support group named DOC.
SNRE’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan - 2016

- Ph.D. students indicated that they were pressured to complete their degree in five years. Students added that students with children are expected to be on the same five-year timeline as everyone else and they did not believe that was fair.

- Students generally described their peers as being very welcoming and friendly.

**Theme #4: Support and Mentorship**

- Students had mixed experiences. Some students described their interactions as “generally positive” while others spoke of their interactions as having a more “business” tone—something they wished were different.
  - Generally speaking, students desired stronger relationships with their advisors.
  - Students suggested that SNRE provide “standardized” ways for meeting with advisors.

- Students also suggested that international students with low English proficiency should be invited to come to SNRE early in the summer to get support.

- Students said their interests and those of faculty don’t always align and faculty responsibilities are often put on students shoulders. For example, students are encouraged to complete master’s projects that invite them to collaborate across tracks. However, there are a number of restrictions on these projects that seem arbitrary to students. For example, they really struggle to find advisors for these projects.

- Students expressed a great deal of concern and anxiety over how GSI positions and funding opportunities are assigned. GSI positions were considered by many students to be highly desirable because of the experience they provided and the funding they ensured, but students often felt that the hiring process invited opportunities for favoritism.

**Staff**

The focus groups discussed recruitment, hiring, and retention of faculty and staff; their experiences in SNRE; student experiences; and the development of the DEI strategic plan.

- Most participants indicated that they were unsure what kind of work SNRE is doing with regard to diversity.
  - Open staff positions are posted on several job sites.
  - In addition, particular lists designed are to attract diverse applicants are also used.
  - However, when faculty hire for their labs or programs they each do that in their own way and several staff believed that there was little consideration of diversity in filling those positions.
Depending where one is located within SNRE it can be hard to see what is occurring in other parts of the school, including diversity efforts.

A participant noted that the school doesn’t seem to be looking at inclusion across the various positions in the school.

Several focus group participants discussed the low morale amongst staff because of the high staff turnover in recent years.

Many staff spoke about the variability in the way supervisors respond to staff input on diversity issues and other topics.

  o Some staff had good experiences, others found that their supervisors were less likely to listen, or if they did listen it didn’t result in anything.
  o A few staff explained that they have a sense that not all of SNRE values diversity in the same way.

Staff indicated that they wanted to feel respected and appreciated by faculty and students in SNRE.

Staff believed that sensitivity training would not only help with hiring and the general climate of the school.

A few staff lamented that they didn’t believe that the school was providing enough resources to recruit a diverse student body, so they aren’t able to go to some conferences or some events where many students of color are present.

Staff indicated that there are efforts being done to recruit international students.

  o For example, the school holds webinars for international students.
  o The admissions office had an intern a few years ago who spoke Chinese and could design a website in Chinese.
    - That effort was due more to luck than having a sustained effort to make the website accessible.
  o Simply having a Chinese language website or photos doesn’t mean that the school is welcoming.

One of the biggest challenges in recruiting a diverse student body was funding. Focus group participants feel that SNRE is not funding students to the same degree as peer institutions.

Staff believed that students notice the lack of diversity in the student body, particularly U.S. diversity:

Staff were concerned that the SNRE Diversity Plan will fade if not implemented carefully.

Staff believed that the plan will need support from the university level in order for it to survive.
Faculty members include tenured, tenure track, non-tenured faculty, research associates, and post-doctoral fellows. Each group was offered a separate meeting opportunity to maintain anonymity and encourage honesty. The focus groups discussed recruitment, hiring, and retention of faculty and staff; their experiences in SNRE; student experiences; and the development of the DEI strategic plan.

- Participants didn’t believe that the school thought that much about diversity.
  - Participants also felt that there was an openness to work on improving it.

- However, some faculty indicated that they were unsure what diversity means, and hadn’t heard it discussed until the DEI Committee began holding the focus group discussions on the topic.

- Faculty also felt that these conversations were occurring in some spaces in SNRE but not others.
  - There is an overreliance on the EJ track and a few vocal faculty members to be responsible for and take care of diversity efforts in the school.

- Participants felt that improving diversity in the school requires incentives.
  - Until there are more incentives for working on diversity and consequences for not working on it, focus group participants felt that the level of faculty participation will not change.

- A number of research scientists indicated that it is often an “uphill effort” to get their attempts to improve the school appreciated, and that they often don’t feel included in the school.
  - More respect from tenure and tenure-track faculty is expected.
  - One research scientist explained that when they try to take on additional projects to support student interests, those efforts are not always acknowledged and treated with respect.
  - A research scientist indicated that he/she had experienced a few difficult interactions with faculty, where his/her ideas were dismissed and ignored.
  - Another research scientist added that the awkward exchanges may not have occurred if faculty and research scientists had comparable social identities and power. For instance:
    - One research scientist indicated that he/she had sought to support a student who had experienced some academic and personal difficulties, but the support was dismissed and ignored. However, when the same student received a letter of support from a faculty member, the student was able to get the accommodations they needed.
    - Another example, research scientists have to petition to vote at faculty meetings.
  - Research scientists discussed feeling as if they are a minority in the school and are just “different” and this leads them to be seen differently by faculty.
Another participant commented that the school has a number of silos which can create feelings of isolation.
  - Collaboration across tracks is not always encouraged.

In general, postdoctoral fellows expressed a desire to have more candid conversations about issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the school.
  - Some reported that they encountered “blank stares” when bringing up the topics in certain spaces.
  - One participant added there were limited spaces where he could go and “have those conversations.”
  - They perceived that SNRE was not an inclusive environment for students and postdoctoral fellows whose experiences and identities varied from the “norm.”
  - Some wanted to see students recognize their privilege and engage in conversations about how that affects how they view the world and the activities they undertake.
    - Explore the intersectionality of privilege and the climate in SNRE.

Faculty participants felt that faculty recruitment seemed “pretty good” but also acknowledged that they were not aware of specific efforts to recruit diverse faculty and postdoc groups.
  - The underrepresentation of certain groups in the faculty was viewed as a pipeline problem; that is, they felt there was lack of diversity in the profession and that manifested itself in lack of diversity in recent Ph.D.s.
  - Without intentional efforts the status quo would remain.

Research scientists noted that they are responsible for securing their own funding for most positions, so it can be difficult to attend to diversity in the hiring processes.
  - They did not believe that SNRE was considering diversity among research scientists a priority.
  - There are also a number of research scientists affiliated with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, and they have their own hiring and recruitment practices.
  - If research scientists were going to increase their presence in the school, then they believed there might be a possibility to consider diversity in hiring more effectively.

Reflections on recruitment and retention experiences revealed a need for sensitivity around the unique needs and experiences of older postdocs, such as those who may be caring for children and/or aging parents.
  - Some fellows reported that there was little, if any, resources to help with things like relocation expenses.

It also seemed that basic accommodations for nursing mothers were inadequate. One participant outlined the challenging steps she has to take to gain access to the lactation room.
When asked about how they believed that students experience the climate, the participants believed that students felt like they lacked community.

Faculty were concerned for the experiences of international students.
- Research scientists added that these students seem to be comfortable only in particular labs and communities, but not the school as a whole.
- Faculty participants proposed that SNRE consider ways to support the large and increasing number of international students in their courses.
  - One example might be to have an international students serve as GSIs.
  - Faculty cautioned that might put burdens on such GSIs that extend beyond teaching.
  - It was also suggested that international students be assigned an advisor before matriculating in SNRE.

1. Consider training the advisors to ensure that the advising is done well.

Some faculty believed that climate in SNRE, particularly in the ________ track was “pretty positive” and “inclusive.”
- Students were supportive of each other.
- They were actively working towards dismantling barriers between each other
- They spent a lot of time with each other working on academic and social issues.

Place more emphasis on Michigan and Detroit – work in our own backyard.

DEI efforts must be more centralized.
- A few diversity champions or even a diversity committee is not sustainable.
- Without a shared commitment across tracks and the provision of adequate human and financial resources, focus group participants had doubts about the plausibility of real change.