

**Committee on Equal Opportunities  
Visit to Northern Kentucky University  
Summary and Recommendations  
October 18-19, 2004**

**Adopted by CEO: 02-21-2005**

**Executive Summary**

**Purpose and Process:** The purpose of the visit was to allow CEO members to review institutional activities that support the objectives of *The Kentucky Plan*. The Committee on Equal Opportunities is charged with monitoring institutional progress toward implementing *The Kentucky Plan for Equal Opportunities* and the Partnership Agreement with the U. S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Monitoring is completed through data analysis and campus visits. The Committee on Equal Opportunities conducted a campus visit at Northern Kentucky University October 18-19, 2004. The committee met with campus leaders, students, faculty, and other interested parties to discuss institutional activities that support the objectives of *The Kentucky Plan*. The meetings are designed to give CEO members an opportunity to hear from selected members of the university community. Campus visits are not meant to be scientific, empirical data gathering exercises. The CEO's intent is to learn first-hand about the success of equal opportunity plan implementation on campus.

**Core Focus:** The CEO visit report begins by identifying the general focus for review and discussion with the university administration and campus community. The committee was interested in learning about Northern's strategies and leadership to implement the recommendations from the previous two campus visits and also to learn about the results of those efforts.

**Report Summary:** Northern Kentucky University has taken a slightly different course to implementing a range of programs and strategies to attract a diverse student and staff compliment. For example, NKU has implemented new admission standards to be implemented in collaboration with Gateway Community College, learning communities, and a priority hire program for faculty. Northern is the youngest public university in the Commonwealth, created in 1968, and enrolled over 14,300 students in fall 2004. Although located in a suburban (rural) setting, NKU serves an urban population including a large number of students from Cincinnati, Ohio, an urban center. The president has taken an active interest in the university accomplishing the objectives of *The Kentucky Plan for Equal Opportunities*. NKU is identified as one of the great employers of the greater Cincinnati area, a status that should make the university more competitive with other employers in the urban area.

Since the campus visit in 2000, NKU, supported by its core values (learner centered, excellence, assess with the opportunity to succeed, public engagement, intellectual and creative freedom, multiculturalism, innovation and creativity, and collegiality and collaboration) developed and implemented a number of initiatives intended to enhance student's preparation, engagement, and achievement and thereby, substantially increase their chances of persistence to graduation. Examples of strategies include learning communities geared toward African American students, the book connection program, the NKU academy, NKURocks, Project Aspire, and a one-week residential orientation program for entering African American students. NKU President James

Votruba clearly stated that the university is working diligently to build an inclusive and multi-cultural environment in which all students can thrive. The discussions within the focus groups, as well as general presentations made to the committee, reflect steady performance, with notable improvements that have resulted in steady progress toward the commitments and objectives outlined in *The Kentucky Plan*. While it is evident in the university's vision statement, core values, and the president's commitment that diversity is important, its value does not appear to permeate or is not universally embraced by the university's rank and file. Finally, it was evident by the dialogue among CEO members and university representatives during several of the focus group sessions, difficulty experienced by organizations across the country; that conversations focused on race are difficult. The strained nature of the dialogue points out a need for the CEO to continue to refine its process to enhance interaction and thereby allow institutions to have the full benefit of the campus visits.

Strategies used to implement recommendations from the 1998 and 2000 campus visit reports have yielded varying degrees of success. For example, enrollment of African American undergraduates and graduate students has steadily increased since 1999. The university developed programs to promote student retention and success, and participated in student forums to address diversity in the campus community. The number of African American student organizations has increased from 6 to 13. New initiatives include the Sherehe graduation ceremony, Black Excellence Day, an early warning grade notification system, and expansion of the Office for African American Student Affairs and Ethnic Services. Student retention and graduation, however, remains a challenge at NKU. The university is located near an urban center and serves an urban and suburban population with rural influences, however, its location does not appear to consistently benefit the university's efforts to employ more African Americans in strategic areas. Despite strong competition NKU has shown a steady increase in the number of full-time African American faculty, and the number of African Americans employed as professionals. However, the representation of African Americans at the executive, administrative, and managerial levels has decreased. Discussions within the focus groups indicate that these positions do not frequently become available but also that not enough is being done by the university to attract more African Americans to serve in these positions.

### **Recommendations by CEO**

#### ***Communications:***

1. The university in collaboration with Gateway Community and Technical College has implemented new strategies that will impact the admission and enrollment of African American students beginning in fall 2005. These strategies appear to be well founded and over the long-term may strengthen the student retention and graduation rates. The committee agrees with the university's intent to clearly communicate the new strategies to the P-12 systems, students, and parents in the northern Kentucky service area. Many times strategies are implemented but those who may experience the greatest negative impact are not made aware of the policy implications.
2. African American faculty members, as well as students, stated that NKU administrators are slow to respond to their concerns. A common theme in the student and faculty focus group discussions was that information sharing by the administration is slow and many times not clear regarding intent or application. Students, faculty, and staff noted that the lack of timely information makes it appear that they are excluded from important policy decisions. They suggest that the university administration should make a more concerted effort to ensure that

all members of the university community have access to information and an opportunity to more fully participate in policy discussions and development.

3. There is misinformation or a lack of clarity among the faculty regarding the application of certain aspects of the NKU tenure process. The faculty suggests that the university review its tenure process, the information provided to faculty, and communicate definitively to faculty, particularly African American faculty, regarding the process for tenure. Some faculty stated that there is a perception that different standards and practices are used to award tenure to some compared to the standards and practices used to award tenure to others, and that these perceptions make the tenure process appear to not always be fair.
4. Graduate and law students noted surprise that information regarding diversity policy, support programs, and diversity of faculty is not easily found on the university's web page. They suggest that because minority students are few in number, the university should provide students with specific information regarding diversity and develop a mechanism to connect minority students in all graduate and law programs, particularly newly admitted students before they arrive on campus.
5. The university should clearly communicate the intent and application of its "priority hire policy". The perception among professional staff and faculty is that this policy applies to all positions at the university when in fact it only applies to faculty positions in specific areas identified by the Office of Affirmative Action and the president. The perception appears to fuel a belief that departments and colleges across the campus do not embrace the spirit of this creative solution for adding diversity to the workforce.

***Mentoring Programs:***

1. The university should strive to provide a general course of direction and guidance for all students and staff members. Faculty members believe that the university should offer formal mentoring to individuals seeking tenure with clearly delineated information regarding their status as they attempt to remain on track for tenure. Faculty and professional staff believe that a formal mentoring program would enable them to better prepare for the tenure process.
2. The university should support junior faculty and professional staff interested in pursuing advanced degrees, participating in leadership programs, and professional development opportunities. Faculty and professional staff agreed that the university should restructure its internal "grow your own" program to better support the efforts of employees to take advantage of opportunities for career advancement.
3. The university should aggressively identify opportunities to appoint African American Deans and department Chairs. Currently, no African Americans are employed as academic Deans or department Chairs at NKU. The CEO acknowledges that these positions rarely become available, however the committee encourages the university to pursue opportunities to include African Americans in positions of leadership, as they become vacant or as new positions are created.

***Student Issues:***

1. The Committee applauds the university's effort to place a high priority on personal contact with students, creating the early alert system, involving the faculty, testing the system before its implementation, and already responding to approximately 30 student referrals early in the fall semester. The built-in student regimen should insure that students do not fall through the cracks. The university should continue to support the program with resources and appropriate staff.
2. The university should consider posting a notice on its website to notify students that services or support programs are moving to a new location. Students expressed concern that the Office for African American Student Affairs and Ethnic Services (OAASAE) was relocated without forewarning.
3. They asked that university administrators work more closely with the Student Government Association to encourage them to provide assistance and financial support to programs and workshops intended for African Americans. Sometimes, when the Student Governments agenda is developed it excludes funding for certain groups and issues.
4. Students in the graduate programs and Chase Law School suggest that the university should include in letters of acceptance information regarding support services available to minority students, including the web address that discuss the institution's vision regarding diversity.
5. Students in the graduate programs and Chase Law School focus group suggests that the university create programs for all minority students similar to those available to African American students.
6. Students in the graduate programs and Chase Law School suggest that the university place more advertising in locations that are heavily populated by African American and other minority populations to significantly increase the representation of diverse populations in the graduate schools and Chase Law School.

***Employment, Upward Mobility, and Opportunity for Career Advancement:***

1. The committee recommends that the university analyze the information obtained during exit interviews and share that information more readily with deans, chairpersons, vice presidents, and others who are responsible for employment in order to address environment concerns within departments.
2. Participants from the professional staff noted that a number of departments are unable to identify a significant pool of diverse candidates for positions and suggest that the university provide more support and resources to assist them.
3. The university should work to create opportunities for African American faculty and staff to gain promotion in permanent positions, as well as provide opportunities for them to advance their career through career development strategies.
4. Participants from the professional staff noted that the priority hire policy applies only to faculty positions and suggest that for selected positions in significantly underutilized areas the policy should be applied to professional positions with recommendation by human resources and approval by the president.

5. The university should strive to create a more welcoming environment for African American students, faculty, and staff members, the perception expressed during focus group discussions is that tolerance for diversity and inclusion exists at NKU, but true acceptance seems to be elusive.

### **Recommendations or Concerns to CEO**

1. It was suggested that the CEO continue to refine its campus visit process to enhance interaction and thereby allow institutions to have the full benefit of the campus visits. It was evident by the dialogue during several focus group sessions that conversations that focus on race are difficult and requires more sensitivity.
2. The CEO should ask that the participants from the 2004 campus visit be invited to participate in discussions at the next campus visit, if they are still at the university.
3. The CEO should make a greater effort to avoid conducting campus visits when students, faculty, and staff are likely to be away from campus, for example during national holidays, spring or fall break.

### **Discussions with Constituent and Focus Groups**

***Discussion with Student Representatives:*** The highest priority of *The Kentucky Plan* and *The Partnership* with the Office for Civil Rights is to create a campus and campus/community environment that is inviting and supportive of a diverse student, faculty, and staff population.

University administrators discussed strategies and programs that were implemented to directly influence the enrollment and retention of underrepresented minority students, including their impact on the welfare, growth, and development of students at NKU. The university's strategy includes the notion that building a diverse environment is everyone's responsibility. Workshops, lectures, community events centered around diversity issues, performances, and excursions support this value. Students agreed that certain aspects of the NKU environment have improved but voiced concern about the unmet needs of minority students at NKU. Also, students acknowledged various programs established specifically for African American, Latino, and other ethnic minority groups on campus to facilitate their adjustment to campus life. For example, the students discussed the NKURocks program as one that has successfully helped them adjust to campus life. Students stated that this program is beneficial, enabling them to meet other African American students, to develop mentoring relationships, and social and academic coping skills.

Students said that they sometimes feel compelled to try to educate the academic and university community on issues of diversity to assist NKU in fostering an environment that encourages acceptance of diverse groups. Programs and workshops have been offered to promote education, social and cultural growth, outreach, and other activities that connect minority students to the campus community as well as to each other. African American students credited other ethnic groups for providing encouragement and support when they attempt to overcome barriers.

One student suggested that the Student Government Association does not properly represent minority student interests, including a lack of support for the STAR organization (Students Together against Racism). Students noted that a request was made to NKU administrators for additional funds to support additional programs, however, at the time of the campus visit the administrators had not responded to the request. Students would like to receive a formal response from the university. African American students were concerned that they are not given a strong role in selecting an advisor and wondered if advisors are selected for all students using the same criteria and procedure.

Students commended the university for providing facilities and meeting space for their organizations, but stated that the space in the new location is not adequate. For example, seating in offices does not accommodate the number of students utilizing the office. Oftentimes, students must sit on the floor while waiting to meet with advisors and counselors. The office of Latino Student Affairs was also relocated; they now reside in a room inside an office with limited space. The university noted that the new student union building would resolve the space issue.

***Discussions with Faculty and Staff:*** An objective of *The Kentucky Plan* is to increase the number and proportion of African American faculty and professional staff employed by public postsecondary institutions. Recruitment and retention of African American faculty and professional staff remains one of the most difficult challenges that higher education institutions confront. Members of the faculty noted that they had received invitations to participate in the focus groups and were surprised that every faculty member did not receive an invitation. They were concerned that the College of business was not represented.

NKU highlighted several initiatives directed at increasing the diversity of the faculty. For example, one professor discussed the Southern Regional Education Board Doctoral Scholars Program and explained its benefits in helping to increase the number of African American professors. NKU attended the SREB Student Recruitment Fair several years ago, and plans to attend again. However, it was noted that while the program has established a remarkable pipeline for recruiting junior faculty it offers limited opportunity to sponsor promising junior faculty because it requires relocation to another institution (UK or UofL).

Faculty and professional staff offered discussion regarding NKU's strengths. For example, the NKU College of Law sponsors a program that allows students to enroll in law school free of charge for 2 weeks in the summer; NKU invites primary and secondary students on campus for class related activities in the summer instead of focusing exclusively on sports, and the Office of African American Student Affairs and Ethnic Services administers the NKURocks mentoring program.

Some faculty expressed concern that the Women's Study program does not have a permanent home and is scheduled to move from its current location in the library. University officials noted that there are ongoing discussions regarding space for this program. There were mixed feelings among the faculty regarding the "Dialogue on Race." Some faculty informed the committee that they participated voluntarily, others said that they were unaware of the event, still others noted that they attended but had mixed reactions to the dialogue. They agreed that attendance by members of the faculty was sparse. The university noted that the event is sponsored by students and the students invite selected groups.

Members of CEO observed that faculty concerns seemed consistent with concerns expressed by students: Race and gender courses are often taught by faculty that are not well prepared to teach

the topic; African American students are often singled out during class discussion; and, additional professional development is needed for professors addressing these issues. They noted that the university is not addressing the concerns. Faculty also expressed concern regarding the discussions surrounding an African American studies program at NKU.

Faculty and professional staff suggested that the dual admission policy between Northern Kentucky University and Gateway Community and Technical College may lack sufficient resources to nurture students enrolled at Gateway through the program. There is a fear that if the system is not properly funded it will not provide the level of support needed by students. It was noted that students enrolled in the dual program may find it a challenge to pay the required fees and that the new admissions policy will have a greater negative impact on African Americans as compared to other students.

African American faculty and professional staff complained that they did not have sufficient input into the development of the new admissions policy –there were 3 African Americans appointed to the groups responsible for developing the new dual enrollment policy.

They noted that the sciences and the law school have experienced more success recruiting and retaining African American students, in fact, faculty commented that the two programs should be highlighted as employing best practices. Faculty suggested that NKU administrators should be open to being more fully informed, by the faculty, about NKU's diverse student population and how to meet the needs of the students.

***Discussions with the Academic Deans and Department Chairs:*** CEO members and deans and chairpersons noted that at times during this focus group session the conversations were strained and somewhat unproductive. The deans and department heads stated that overall, the environment at NKU is very positive, and the NKU community supports *The Kentucky Plan*. The College of Business has been successful in employing African American faculty. The Chair of the Department of Communication stated that it is difficult to recruit African American faculty because of the small pool of candidates available in this field, he did not suggest any alternatives or other approaches that may help alleviate the lack of candidates.

Other deans and department chairs commented on efforts, initiatives, and factors used by their respective areas to encourage potential faculty to join the staff at NKU, such as, location of the institution, cost of living, business and population growth, other changes in the area, and the new Freedom Center located in Cincinnati. Also, they noted that the Provost has used special resources to enhance African American faculty salaries to persuade them to come to NKU.

NKU is many times at a competitive disadvantage when considering salaries therefore teaching is strongly emphasized to potential candidates. The size of the institution appeals to many prospective faculty members. The deans and chairs also credited the Multicultural Affairs Office, and Ms. Cheryl Nunez, for providing assistance as well.

The deans and department chairs noted that some aspects of recruiting faculty are unique. This includes salary as well as the environment, though some issues were found to be specific to minorities, in particular African Americans. For example, prospective African American faculty members often observe the representation of people of color when visiting an institution. Students also notice the level of diversity among faculty and staff when they visit institutions. The deans and department chairs suggested that students of color sometimes make decisions based on whether they see other individuals that look like them. The deans and department chairs

stated that currently there are no African Americans serving as permanent deans or department chairs at NKU.

***Discussions with the Black Faculty and Staff Association:*** The Black Faculty and Staff Association was founded in the late 1970s as a way to enhance the campus environment for African American faculty and staff by serving as a voice for faculty and staff on critical policy issues, promoting social interaction, professional growth, serving as mentors for students, and participating in policy development and implementation. The university engages in dialogue with the leadership of BFSA using the association as a sounding board to supplement its traditional structure for policy development and implementation.

Members of BFSA commented on a wide range of issues affecting faculty, staff, and students at NKU. They stated that, while the environment on campus and in the surrounding community has improved over time the climate also has been inconsistent; for example, it appears that the overall efforts to recruit African American faculty have been contradictory in terms of identification of potential candidates and hires. The organization also felt that the Northern Kentucky area offers a wide variety of opportunities but is very conservative, which tends to be an impediment for African Americans desirous of career advancement. Several members noted that they have not seen a formal university plan to recruit African American faculty and that there is reluctance by administrators to follow through on suggestions proposed by the BFSA. Departments typically implement their own strategies. A formal plan that can be used by all areas should be developed and implemented with proper monitoring and evaluation by human resources or the EEO officer. This will ultimately translate to a more diverse campus and aid in the recruitment, enrollment, and retention of African American and other minority students. Some BFSA members offered a perception that selected members of the administration do not recognize the value of programs proposed by African Americans.

Members of BFSA stated that the organization has taken an active role in the university's recruitment, enrollment, and retention programs. BFSA noted that while they have a strong commitment to helping the university be successful with enrollment and retention programs, the organization is not properly staffed to offer critical services, and the organization is worried that students will see it as a substitute for the university.

Some BFSA members believe that the administration was somewhat heavy handed in implementing the new dual admissions policy between Northern Kentucky University and Gateway Community and Technical College. They complained that very few people of color were involved in the process for developing a policy that may adversely impact the representation of African American students in the dual system and there was not a transition period before the policy was implemented.

BFSA members noted that the process for tenure continues to present difficulties in terms of perception and reality. They stated that African American faculty undergoing the tenure review process sometimes complain that the standards used to award tenure to white faculty members appear to vary from those used to award tenure to African American faculty members. They acknowledge that the rules identified in the handbook are the same for all. Members of the BFSA stated that, to their knowledge, no African American have sought and been given early tenure. They have been told directly, or indirectly, that individuals who are awarded early tenure are "special cases", but wonder aloud why all of the special cases happen to be Caucasians. They continue to be concerned that African American faculty are casually expected to participate in non-traditional activities and community projects outside of campus, but these things are not

recognized, valued, or applied to the tenure review process. They would like more effort made toward providing mentors to support African American faculty who are going through the tenure process. The mentor would offer direction and guidance to assist faculty to successfully navigate the process.

***Discussions with the Campus Environment Team:*** The Campus Environment Team is charged with identifying strategies and making recommendations to the president and board of regents about ways to create a supportive and welcoming campus and community environment for faculty, staff, and students. The committee believes that the Campus Environment Team should take a more active role in reviewing ongoing campus environment issues and make strong recommendations to the president. If it is successful, the university will experience greater consistency in successfully implementing and achieving plan objectives. The president is encouraged to expand the membership to include more student representation using a cross section of the student body. The CEO believes that student input is critical. Also, the Campus Environment Team should have as a priority improving the town and gown relationship with the Covington and Highland Heights community.

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