

**Revising Muhlenberg's Diversity Statement
Summary of Community Feedback
Submitted by the Diversity Strategic Planning
Committee
April 15, 2014**



What is this document?

This document summarizes feedback from Muhlenberg College community members regarding proposed revisions to the College's **Diversity Statement**. Responses (provided by 23 students, 17 staff members and 12 faculty members) were received by the Diversity Strategic Planning Committee (DSPC) at 8 small group discussions held between **January 27 and February 5, 2014**, as well as via email.

In this summary, the DSPC has not attempted to reconcile any conflicting community feedback, but instead to accurately present the most prominent feedback trends. The committee is working on a subsequent revised draft of the Diversity Statement in response to this feedback.

The initial Diversity Statement revision draft submitted to the community for consideration can be viewed on page 7 of this document.

How to read this document:

Community members provided responses regarding each sentence of the initial Diversity Statement revision draft. This document provides a sentence-by-sentence breakdown presenting the most prominent feedback trends, often directly quoting community members.

What do the abbreviations Qn1, Qn1, Qn3 and Qn4 mean?

Participants at the small group discussion events were asked 4 questions about the Diversity Statement draft:

- **Question 1:** What is your general impression of the Diversity Statement?
- **Question 2:** Does the statement include language that is unclear or confusing? What words or phrases are particularly unclear? Can you provide an alternative wording that you think is clearer?
- **Question 3:** Does the statement include language that you think is especially helpful in communicating what diversity means at Muhlenberg? What language is helpful? Why do you think that language is best at communicating how our Muhlenberg community views diversity?
- **Question 4:** What does this statement mean to you as a member of this community?

The abbreviations *Qn1*, *Qn1*, *Qn3* and *Qn4* (which appear after community feedback points) indicate which question the community member was answering.

Sentence-by-sentence breakdown

Phrases with quotation marks are direct quotes from community members.

The sentence:

Muhlenberg College believes that diversity, in many forms and expressions, broadens our minds, enriches the academic experience, enhances the quality of life on campus, and prepares our graduates for lives of leadership and service in a democratic, pluralistic society and a diverse world.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- “what is diversity?” “define key terms;” requests for definitions; the wording of the statement made it unclear who or what exactly was being referred to. (Qn1, 5)
 - “well thought out, more specific than previous, could still be more specific” (Qn1)
 - “I really liked the words ‘pluralistic society’ because a pluralistic society is run by many groups, and that says that we look for people who disagree with our views.” (Qn3). However, another respondent specifically objected to the phrase “pluralistic society” as too broad and academic. (Qn2)
 - “statement is overall divisive among groups on campus.” (Qn1)
 - “enriches our experience evokes high school multicultural day;” requests for strong alternative language (Qn2)
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The sentence:

We believe that a liberal arts education at Muhlenberg should cultivate a desire to understand, a capacity to respect, and an ability to appreciate multiple perspectives and experiences, particularly those of historically underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- One respondent reported that they “appreciate that the statement says that we are particularly focused on multiple perspectives of historically underrepresented and marginalized groups” (Qn3). However, other respondents did not agree that all listed categories of diversity (“lifestyles,” “intellectual pursuits,” etc.) fall under ‘historically underrepresented and marginalized groups’
 - “capacity to respect” is not strong enough language; this perspective was stated multiple times (Qn2)
 - some community members like the phrase “historically underrepresented/ marginalized” and some don’t
 - how do we measure “the ability to appreciate”? (Qn2)
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The sentence:

We believe that our academic program is not able to achieve the goals set in our mission statement unless each member of the community recognizes and understands the benefits, conflicts, tensions, and intersections that are inherent in diversity.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- “need to mention dedication to diversity in curricular programming, not just

diversity that is embodied.” “Say more about educational and academic goals.” (Qn1, 5)

- reads as a goal that’s been accomplished, but it’s something we haven’t done yet (Qn2)
 - the phrase “each member of the community recognizes...” is not true and should be framed as a goal (Qn2)
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The sentence:

Diversity is, therefore, a fundamental Muhlenberg value.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- When commenting on positive attributes of the statement, respondents commented on this sentence as being strong. (Qn3) However, others thought this was unclear. One respondent stated, “before we can claim it is a value, we need more representation.” (Qn2)
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The sentence:

To that end, we assume the responsibility of providing educational opportunities to students of talent and potential and professional opportunities to talented faculty and staff representing many different backgrounds and experiences.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- “talent” is exclusionary (Qn2)
 - some language is paternalistic: “providing educational opportunities...” implies status/charity/condescending, instead maybe change to “committed to welcoming” or “enriching;” “assume the responsibility” may be interpreted as a burden, perhaps change to “we aim to provide” or “fill the role” or “take on the task” (Qn2)
 - The statement “mentions faculty and students [and staff] explicitly, but does not include administration, board of trustees etc.” (Qn1)
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The sentence:

This reflects our College’s commitment to principles of justice, equality, and democracy.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- disagreement with the word “democracy” as too narrow if we are considering other nationalities and ethnicities (Qn2)
 - seems most attractive but using words like justice and equality without saying why those are important seems meaningless. (Qn2)
 - positive response to this sentence (Qn3)
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The sentence:

The College has already achieved an admirable degree of diversity in several important respects, such as religion, intellectual pursuits, socio-economic background, and sexual orientation.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- “This statement is too self congratulatory and should be struck. It assumes that there is such a thing as a limit on diversity.” (Qn2)
 - “Too many sentences proving Muhlenberg does a great job, but the statement instead [should] be about what we are going to do” (Qn1)
 - A respondent commented on the positive change around issues of sexual orientation, while also calling for the statement to be more specifically rooted in Muhlenberg’s history (Qn3)
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The sentence:

We recognize that these successes must not lead to complacency, but inspire us to continued effort.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- disagreement about the use of the word “success” (“I...define ‘success’ very differently.”) (Qn2)
 - the phrase “we recognize that these successes must not lead to ‘complacency’” [contains] troubling word choice. (Qn2) ‘Muhlenberg must recommit’ assumes reader knows history. “ (Qn2)
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The sentence:

Muhlenberg must recommit itself with renewed energy to recruiting and retaining diverse students, faculty and staff whose interlacing range of cultural perspectives, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, nationalities, economic backgrounds, physical abilities, and religious and spiritual values will enrich our curriculum and campus life.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- “‘Muhlenberg must recommit’ assumes reader knows history.” (Qn2)
- desire to remove the word “recommit;” “this is not a response to this moment; instead this is our philosophy about how we operate as it relates to diversity” (Qn2)
- dissatisfaction with the word “interlacing” (Qn2)
- listing is problematic (maybe return to “historically underrepresented and marginalized”) (Qn2)
- “Muhlenberg is a diverse campus in many ways but college isn’t directly talking about ‘elephant in the room’ with the lack of ethnic and racial diversity on campus. We should be more explicit here.” (Qn1)
- “Race, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality... are all linked to dynamics of power and oppression. This should be acknowledged in the statement, so they are separate from categories like ‘lifestyles’ and ‘intellectual pursuits.’” (Qn1)
- “seemed more focused on people rather than the rest of diversity like the thinking and attitudes.” (Qn1)

- other respondents noted that this “categorical breakdown is helpful because it explicitly defines diversity in a broader sense than is traditional considered” (Qn3)
 - some wanted “to know why we need to recommit ourselves now, rather than ten years ago. What has happened before? Why now? It’s a really big and great thing that Muhlenberg is acknowledging” the historical challenge of this work (Qn3)
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The sentence:

We must also commit ourselves to persistent and vigorous efforts to confront, and challenge prejudiced attitudes and behaviors that exclude, demean, or marginalize members of our community by breaking down existing barriers that prevent meaningful discussions about diversity.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- “Breaking down existing barriers” isn’t clear: “are we looking to eliminate barriers or overcome barriers?” ... desire for more of a focus on community sense, to open interpretation. (Qn2)
 - “this needs more specificity because right now it sounds like the end goal is discussion” (Qn2)
 - “This is the only sentence discussing that we care about how to recruit and retain students, staff and faculty of color; institutional commitment should also be to examine barriers” (Qn3)
 - The language of “‘breaking down existing barriers’ is actionable, an aspiration for campus ... but is getting lost. It is very important ... should get moved” (Qn3)
 - Others said we should be sure that it is not just breaking down barriers to create discussion, but to open up access and create change. (Qn3)
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The sentence:

Finally, Muhlenberg College also commits itself to good citizenship in the wider, local community by supporting with our business those vendors and services that are operated by and fairly employ underrepresented groups.

Summary of community member feedback about the sentence:

- saying “vendors and services” is too limiting; this statement should expand to include all people who work on campus. (Qn2)
 - multiple responses were confused by the phrase “vendors and services” (Qn2)
 - “ there are some specific programs that encourage education program and service learning...” “works with schools in Allentown and berg is starting to do a better job promoting higher education” (Statements alluding to things like this are missing, not represented in this sentence) (Qn2)
 - How are we held accountable to these businesses? How do we measure that? How practical is this to the students? Right now, as a student, doesn’t see that measurement in place (Qn2)
 - this is not a good end statement (Qn2)
 - there is a suggestion of a sense of superiority in community (Qn2)
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Summary of general comments or comments about the statement as a whole:

- Need for clarity on the purpose of statement (as opposed to strategic/action plan).
 - Need for work to be more public and transparent
 - Need for a balance between the history of this institution and how we can move forward
 - There was significant variety of general opinion about the statement as a whole:
 - “It feels like a catch all and while ‘historically underrepresented’ is mentioned a few times, it reads as fearful of pointing out the most glaring problems. It reads as if trying to avoid backlash or discomfort from the majority populations on campus.” (Qn3)
 - “ It is helpful that the statement goes beyond race and religion to socio-economic lifestyles, gender identities, etc. It shows that Muhlenberg is trying to really show how open they are to everyone. Also good that it includes faculty and staff because they are also a part of this community.” (Qn3)
 - “I don’t think [the statement as a whole] is helpful in communicating what diversity means at Muhlenberg. It is too vague and could mean anything. Having left-handed or blue-eyed people could be considered as diverse. There needs to be a more narrow way to describe diversity which may include statements that make people uncomfortable.” (Qn3)
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Summary of responses to Question 4:

There is a general sense of appreciation for this statement. A lot of people recognize the potential good it can have and feel like it shows that Muhlenberg is moving forward with diversity. However, many responses strongly expressed the desire that be clear steps after the reformulation of the statement. Many respondents were dubious that this statement alone will lead to many changes, or create clear action. For example: the statement puts “into words an important value that is easy to put lip service [to], but hard to put action to;” and, the “idea of changing our culture should permeate the statement.”