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CONCEPTUALIZING while PROMOTING

DIVERSITY

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Navigating Academia as First-Generation Graduate Students

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Supporting Diversity and Success in Graduate Training

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Welcome!

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The final DECADE Community Meeting of the 2018-2019 academic year happened on April 19th. The topic of the meeting was “Experiences of First-Generation Graduate Students at UC-Irvine”, and the discussion became emotive. First-generation students are those whose parents have not earned a four-year degree.

Participants discussed many challenges that first-generation graduate students experienced throughout their academic journey. A recurring theme was the intersectionality of first-generation status and a person's socioeconomic background. The discussion of this intersectionality contextualized the experiences of many first-generation graduate students and laid the framework for the conversation.

According to a New York Times article, of the 7.3 million undergraduate attending a four-year public and private university, an estimated 20 percent are the first in their family to attend college. For graduate students, the number is much lower. Attendees at the DECADE Community Meeting discussed many of the unique professional, academic, institutional and psychological struggles they face in their pursuit of a graduate degree.

(continued in the next page)
The conversation directed the rest of the discussion towards the topic of mentorship and its role in mitigating many of these struggles. While some shared how mentorship helped them arrive to their current professional destination, they also shared the frustration at the lack of faculty and staff that reflect the diversification of our campus. This creates a sense of disconnect between students and university at large.

To see Laura Pappano’s, “First Generation Students Unite” on The New York Times, Click here

The pursuit of a graduate degree is often a first-generation student’s source of strength. Driven by a motivation to succeed, first-generation students strive to achieve what no one in their family, and often in their home community, has achieved. However, the unique challenges they face leave many with a sense of isolation from both their home community and the academic institution. While UC Irvine strives to uplift and support first-generation students, it can do more to demonstrate that it is truly committed to fostering the growth of this flourishing student community.

Outreach

CORNER By Sara I. Villalta

The DECADE Know How Sessions Spring quarter were a success with the undergraduates. Students left with invaluable tips on the graduate application process and key strategies for linking up with mentors.
Where DECADE can go
Reflections on 2 years as a council-member

By Miles Davison

Editor’s Note: In the last 2 years, Miles Davison has been an invaluable intellectual voice in the DECADE Student Council and community at large. He has been instrumental in our recruitment efforts through our annual Fall Welcome, quarterly socials, and the undergraduate Know-How Sessions. In the following, he offers candid, timely, and thought-provoking reflections on where he sees DECADE in the present, in hopes to sow seeds of growth for its future.

Like many of us, I was drawn to the DECADE community as an advocate of diversity and inclusion for underrepresented and marginalized groups. Throughout the last three years, I’ve seen how DECADE has had a positive impact on the broader UCI community. Along with an increasingly diverse graduate student population, programs like DECADE Plus mentoring, the Know-How Sessions, and WATz Up Community Outreach have created invaluable opportunities for diverse students to get meaningful support.

Despite these successes, serving two years on the DECADE Student Council has revealed elements of DECADE—and the university’s approach to diversity—that hold it back from reaching its full potential. The consequences of these challenges include fading attendance at DECADE events, difficulty sustaining community involvement, and apathy towards DECADE’s focus. Below, I highlight several issues and challenges that I’ve seen and offer suggestions for how the next student council can address them.

What is Diversity? What is DECADE?

Most universities struggle to define diversity; and how they do ultimately sets the tone for how they approach the issue. As such, UCI’s subscription to “inclusive excellence”—which advocates for the inclusion of all voices and identities—permeates through DECADE. While most in the DECADE community would agree with the concept of inclusivity, some vary in the brand of inclusivity that they embrace.

On the surface and through various events, DECADE promotes a brand of inclusivity that seeks to give everyone an equal platform. While some may feel that this approach brings us closer to a diverse utopia, others see this
approach—and DECADE more broadly—as a sanitized effort to embrace diversity without interrogating the underlying systems of power that perpetuate marginality and inequality. For some, this “All Lives Matter” approach to diversity is off-putting, tokenizing, and the reasoning behind fading involvement with DECADE activities. Ironically then, some view the space that is purposed for inclusivity as another space of frustration and marginalization. *Defining diversity in a meaningful and substantive way should be central in the strategic plan moving forward.*

**DECADE and Activism**

Many of us seek out DECADE for support and community, and some see activism or community involvement as a necessary facet of that community. Understandably, many expect DECADE to have an activist element and are disappointed by its lack of collective action. While I empathize with this feeling, it’s important to note that DECADE was not created to be an activist organization. However, it can be a conduit through which like-minded individuals can organize and develop ways to give back to communities in need. We may never find a DECADE-sponsored protest, but we do find DECADE contributing to initiatives that have impacts on our communities.

Students who seek outreach opportunities should take advantage of this and encourage more activities that have direct contact with undergraduates and the outside community.

**DECADE and Student Control/Autonomy**

Both within and outside of the student council, I’ve heard numerous concerns about the autonomy that students have in developing new DECADE-related programs and events. Some perceive that when new ideas are proposed to administration, some are shut down or reimagined in ways that detract from the initial goals of the proposal. Regardless of whether these perceptions are true, they highlight a tension between administration and students that is seldom discussed in public.

To address this, I call for more opportunities for open dialogue between the DECADE Student Council and administrators in a way that is both bi-directional and forward-thinking about the future of DECADE.

**Pathways Forward: Where DECADE can go**

As I depart from the DECADE Student Council, I leave these thoughts in hopes that they’ll spark a discussion about where DECADE is and where it’s going. Despite these challenges, I believe that DECADE has the capacity to upkeep its current strengths while tweaking its focus to address some of the issues highlighted above. Most importantly, I encourage those who have been turned off by DECADE not to give up on it completely, as your perspective is needed for the community to truly move forward.
Dear Miles,

I appreciate the time and effort you put forth in addressing your thoughts on your experience as a member of the DECADE Executive Student Council. I would like to take this time to provide a response.

As you might know, I created the DECADE program in 2010 with funding from a Department of Education FIPSE Comprehensive Grant. Once federal funding ended in 2014, I was pleased that the campus recognized the critical mission of the program and institutionalized it. One of the program’s goals was to have the ethnic and gender breakdown of doctoral student population match that of undergraduate student population within 10 years, i.e. by 2020. I am proud to say that we are now well on our way to reaching that goal. During the past two admission cycles we have seen a significant increase in under-represented minorities being accepted and accepting our graduate admissions offers. Even more important, we have also recently eliminated demographic differences in doctoral degree completion rate, showing that we can retain all students for successful completion. This is the result of a concerted effort by Graduate Division, the Office of Inclusive Excellence, DECADE faculty mentors, and the DECADE Student Council. To achieve our goals, I have worked closely with DECADE Mentors and Graduate Advisors to train them on holistic review of graduate applications and the limitations of GRE scores in predicting graduate student success. Since the program was institutionalized, I have also increased the amount of funding available for DECADE Travel Awards, which supports the professional development of our graduate students. I have also made it a priority to continue the expansion of the Competitive Edge program which facilitates the transition into graduate school for MFA and PhD Students. To address the key points outlined in your reflection:

What is Diversity? What is DECADE?

The DECADE Community is comprised of students and faculty from a variety of backgrounds. By ensuring that DECADE remains "inclusive" we
ensure that the organization allows those who join it to continue learning about the underlying issues that perpetuate marginality and inequality. This includes recruiting non-diverse students to participate in the program.

Although it is clear that attendance levels at some DECADE events has been a concern, it is important to acknowledge that DECADE is evolving and that the needs of students are constantly changing. As a result of these changes, we understand that certain programming may not be as effective or appealing as it was in years past. That is why I ask the DECADE Council to evaluate whether existing programs meet the needs of the DECADE community and initiate alternative programming when necessary. Together with administration, the DECADE Executive Council can work towards offering programming that is relevant and helpful to students. As examples of this, we created WATz Up to provide a forum for our students to meet with school children who were suffering negative impacts from the 2016 election. This program has been successful and continues to grow. In response to student requests for more professional development, we also plan to implement learning communities in the Fall quarter, initially focusing on faculty careers and mentoring.

**DECADE and Activism**

It is true when you say that DECADE was not created to be an activist organization. Because of the nature of DECADE, it is unlikely that the program will be able to meet all of the needs of its community members. What DECADE can do, however, is serve as a safe space for students with common goals, interests, and ideas to meet one another. Forging these relationships may then create potential avenues for students to develop programming and initiatives outside of DECADE that address ongoing issues.

**DECADE and Student Control/Autonomy**

Though DECADE is an organization intended to support students, it is important to remember that it is overseen by administration in the Graduate Division who also have ideas and visions in mind for the success of graduate students as UCI. The council's work is meant to be a collaboration with myself, the Office of Inclusive Excellence and other administrators. Though there may be changes to initial ideas and proposals, they are not meant to shutdown these suggestions. Working together is essential to ensure that new ideas for programming meet the needs of the entire community - both STEM and non-STEM members. Thus, initial ideas for new programming may evolve as more perspectives are included. I am always willing to listen to suggestions as to how communication between students, staff and faculty can be better facilitated. There is a lot of work behind the scenes that is necessary to carry out the mission of DECADE. Better communication will allow for greater transparency and understanding of common goals.

I would like to thank you again for the time and effort you have invested in DECADE. Your feedback is valued and I hope that together with future students and DECADE Councils we will be able to continue improving this program.
This quarter, the DECADE council wishes to spotlight Miguel N. Abad, a third-year Ph.D. student in the School of Education. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from UCLA and has held a career as a youth worker and community-based educator. He has been actively involved in many of DECADE’s programs, beginning as a Competitive EDGE fellow. Allow him to tell you who he is, what he does, and what his goals are.

What is your specific area of research?

In the early 1960s, James Baldwin delivered a speech to a group of educators and teachers in which he said that “as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated”. I am interested in how racialized young people come to resist, contest, and critique conventional notions and presentations of success. This means seeing young people as political actors, rather than as “unmotivated” or “delinquent”. Like the young people I work with, I see my work as a small part of a larger collective resistance, contestation, and critique of dominant forms of educational research that often positions racialized young people as if they or their communities have defects or pathologies that need to be fixed or cured by researchers, policy makers, or educators. Instead, how might educational researchers do better to recognize and attend to the creative ways in which young people theorize about their life conditions, as well as how they imagine different futures?
A Conversation with Miguel N. Abad

**What was your first DECADE experience?**

I was fortunate enough to participate in Competitive Edge when I started at UCI. It provided me an opportunity to start building my community across schools and departments. It’s very easy to feel isolated as a graduate student because of the seemingly endless amount of work and responsibilities that are often on our plates. DECADE spaces have helped me build strong friendships that have helped to remind me that I’m not alone and that I have people cheering me on.

**How have you been involved with DECADE?**

I’ve had the opportunity to contribute to two DECADE related programs that work with undergraduate students. I’ve contributed to the “Know How Sessions” for the last few years. Also, I’ve served as a leadership coach for the DECADE PLUS program.

**What are your plans after UCI?**

My intention is to pursue a career in academia. At the same time, I know that the academic job market can be very precarious. I’ve always been a person who needs to have a plan B. In case academia doesn’t work out, I may return to out-of-school time education and youth work.

**How do you plan to advocate for diversity in your career?**

Institutions such as academia are often harsh and unforgiving places, especially for people whom the academy wasn’t built for. Moreover, so much of our worth tends to be reduced to what and how many fellowships, grants, publications, etc. you can accumulate. My energy and solidarity is primarily focused on supporting my peers whose experiences, viewpoints, and work aren’t acknowledged—let alone respected—within their own departments, disciplines, or within the academy.

“**My energy and solidarity is primarily focused on supporting my peers whose experiences, viewpoints, and work aren’t acknowledged—let alone respected—within their own departments, disciplines, or within the academy.**"
DECADE End of the Year Celebration and Pub Night  By Taffeta Wood

DECADE held its End of Year Celebrations, both on Thursday, May 24th, at the Graduate Resource Center and May 1st at Anthill Pub and Grille. It was a great time to come together as a community to reflect on our efforts to build a more diverse and representative university. It’s really the community of students (and faculty) that make DECADE work. Thank you to all who attended and we hope to see you all at events next year!
Dr. Mark Lawson from UC San Diego (UCSD) presented at this quarter’s Speaker Series. Though Dr. Lawson has extensive research in Biological Sciences, he presented research on another topic titled, “Supporting Diversity and Success in Graduate Training: Novel Approaches to Preparing for Entrance Into and Exit from Graduate and Postdoctoral Training”. Dr. Lawson started the presentation by calling attention to the ongoing disparity and lack of representation of people of color in science and academia. In response, UCSD created a program to address the issues of access to science fields and to help students stay interested in science. Students from all over the country, specifically places where science training is not as strong, were invited to participate in the program.

After surveying students on their experience, researchers found that students who identified as scientists were more intentional in their quest to become scientists. UCSD also found that though researchers had designed a program for students with agent goals (i.e. status and power), students were more concentrated on communal goals (i.e. affiliation and closeness). Because of these findings, Dr. Lawson recommends a shift in training and education towards more communal ends to motivate students of diverse backgrounds to pursue and maintain a focus on science.
Providing up to $1,000 per doctoral student, the DECADE Student Travel Award is aimed to support students’ “continued engagement in research as well as academic and professional development” by helping finance students’ expenses to research and professional conferences. As part of their award, we ask awardees to tell us the ways in which the travel award and their conference attendance benefitted their intellectual, academic, and professional development. Overall, two themes in awardees’ stories include the recognition of conferences as training grounds for field expertise and as a means to look toward their future career endeavors.

Training Ground for Expertise

In their narratives, awardees talked about how conferences served as a way to both position themselves as experts while also further expanding upon their theoretical and methodological know-how in their fields. One awardee in biological sciences wrote: “I exchanged ideas with a scientist…regarding optimal methods for isolating extracellular vesicles… I will implement some of his suggestions as I move forward in my work.” Along this vein, another awardee interested in higher education administration discussed how she “provided [her] opinions and recommendations for programming at other universities”, and how she was able to “expand upon [her] knowledge… of ongoing methods to promote diversity in higher education” through discussions with scholars and administrators. Ultimately, these experiences allowed them to see “where the field is and is moving towards”.

Looking to the Future

Many awardees also discussed the ways in which these opportunities serve as means to look to their future career endeavors, including finding research networks for collaboration and establishing professional relationships for employment in their post-graduate career. Awardees wrote how engaging with other researchers “gave [them] an opportunity to discuss potential collaboration with other scholars” and “allowed [them] to engage and network with prospective employers”.

Opportunities for professional development for emerging scholars cannot be underestimated. By alleviating financial constraints, the DECADE Student Travel Award allows researchers to authentically practice and expand on their expertise, better paving the way for professional success in the future.
DECADE Strategic Plan

DECADE Learning Community

By Sara Sameni

After analyzing the strategic plan meeting notes from various schools and discussing it with the Graduate Dean, Frances Leslie, a number of common themes show up consistently: the sense of students’ isolation, lack of coherent student body on campus, and the urgent need to develop a “Learning Community” among students.

What is a Learning Community?

What we envision is for students to get together in an informal setting, network with faculties, other alumni, and possible future recruits. We have realized that there are a lot of resources on campus, but unfortunately students do not fully utilize these resources. In addition, students are not well connected in many departments which leads to division and sense of isolation on campus.

Hence, our goals include to better connections between resources and students and between students and others students via a stronger student community. To this end, we are planning a series of workshops in a 3-stage format addressing: A) the needs of new students transitioning graduate life, B) the needs of mid-point students C) the needs of exiting students.

In this “Learning Community”—intended to be an informal workshop series—students will learn new tips specific to their stage in their graduate training. We will make an effort to put this at lunch time so that most of the students can make it to the events. In this series, students will have a chance to network with other students and experts in a relaxing and warm environment. By building such a community, we hope to connect students together, better prepare students for graduate life, make students ready for the job market ,and connect students with possible future recruiters either in academia or industry.

At this point, we are seeking suggestions from the campus. If you like the proposed “Learning Community”, please let us know. If there are certain things you would like to see or have concerns about our proposed event, please share your thoughts with us as well.
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