

CAMPUS PROTESTS

Student Activists Bring Demands to the Table. Not Everyone Leaves Satisfied.

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WES EDWARDS, THE FORUM

Claremont McKenna College was among the campuses caught up in a wave of protests over racial-climate issues last fall. Hiram Chodosh, its president, met with student protesters on

the campus in November, but the college had already begun engaging with students on how to meet their demands for new measures to promote diversity.

When Patrick Elliott came to Claremont McKenna College last fall for his freshman year, tensions at the private liberal-arts institution were reaching a boiling point. In November protests over the college's racial climate — including two hunger strikes — erupted on the campus, eventually leading to the [resignation of the dean of students](#).

Those efforts “sparked a ton of conversation,” said Mr. Elliott, a rising sophomore who is now chair of the diversity and inclusion board for the student government, the Associated Students of Claremont McKenna College. “It sparked a lot of dissent, but it provided CMC with the catalyst to have these conversations.”

Mr. Elliott is a member of a steering committee for the college's [Personal and Social Responsibility Initiative](#). He and other students on the committee — which also has representatives from the faculty, staff, administration, and Board of Trustees — work with administrators to develop new diversity projects on the campus.

Now the administration is confronting the challenges of meeting student demands. While administrators stress the importance of compromise, patience, and careful planning, some students say there isn't enough communication on what the college is doing to promote inclusivity.

Claremont McKenna is far from the only campus that is grappling with months-old student demands; dozens find themselves in similar situations. But the small Southern California campus was one of the first to begin responding to its students' cries for better inclusivity. The slow negotiation that ensued illustrates just how difficult it will be for students and administrators across the country to satisfy everyone involved.

‘A Resource Center for All Students, Period’

In April 2015 student activists at Claremont McKenna submitted to the college president a [list of demands](#) for new measures to promote diversity. They included a general-education requirement focused on diversity issues; institutional funds for cultural-affinity groups; mandatory racial-sensitivity training for faculty members; and greater diversity in speakers brought to the college for special lectures.

Some of those measures — including the creation of a student-resource center and a position focused on diversity in the office of the dean of students — were being discussed among college leaders before the protests, said Hiram Chodosh, the college's president.

“Those were very important moves for us, but moves that were not initiated by the events of mid-November but rather through our own engagement with students long before that, as well as our own planning efforts,” Mr. Chodosh said.

Nyree Gray, the college's chief civil-rights officer, was given the additional title of assistant vice president for diversity and inclusion in March. She is also a co-chair of the steering committee for Personal and Social Responsibility, or PSR.

“We'll see with some schools that they'll do initiatives, but the initiatives only last for the duration of that committee or that group or when that group is there,” said Ms. Gray. Changes like creating her new position, she said, show that Claremont McKenna “really wants to make sure that goes into the framework of the institution.”

The new student-resource center, which was a key demand of the student activists, is being temporarily housed in a “modular space,” a small trailerlike structure, and will move this fall to the second floor of Heggblade Center, above the dean of students' office, Ms. Gray said. But so far, the resource center has not fulfilled all students' expectations.

Michaiah Young, a rising junior and co-president of the Black Student Alliance, said that student activists had envisioned the center as a safe space for students whose identities have historically been marginalized, “where you can get away from people who refuse to acknowledge aspects of your identity.”

Ms. Young added that such a space could have provided LGBT students with a place to decompress after the [mass shooting at a gay nightclub](#) in Orlando, Fla., last month.

Campus Racial Tensions



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Austin Gosch, a rising junior and a member of the college’s Sexuality and Gender Alliance, said that the steering committee’s [proposal](#) for the resource center had disregarded students’ opinions.

“They took out all words pertaining to marginalized identities and just said it’s a resource center for all students, period,” Mr. Gosch said.

“We’re all going into this space next year not really knowing what it’s capable of doing or what it’s allowed to really do,” said Casey Garcelon, a rising senior and one of the students involved in designing programming for the resource center.

Ms. Gray said that the resource center, which has not yet been given an official name, will connect students with assistance involving financial aid, counseling, and other needs. And, she said, “marginalized identities or people who feel underrepresented in the community will feel supported in that space.”

“But as far as creating a space that’s exclusive,” she added, “it wasn’t the intention of the college to create any space that’s exclusive to any one group or particular group on campus but a place that’s supportive for the entire campus.”

Some compromises had to be made in planning the resource center for the sake of feasibility, Mr. Elliott said. For example, rather than providing designated meeting spaces for cultural-affinity groups, the center will use a “rental” model in which space can be reserved for certain time periods by any student group.

“A lot of people are going to be looking at it with very, very high critiques, which I actually think is a good thing with it being in its inaugural year this coming fall,” Mr. Elliott said. “You want to test its stability if this is something that’s going to be here for a long time and going to be presented as one of CMC’s foundational attributes.”

‘It’s on the Agenda’

Another major demand from student activists was the general-education requirement centered on diversity issues. Such a requirement has yet to be adopted by the college.

“It’s very important that whatever we do not be done simply as a response to get the problem to go away, or to appease, or anything like that,” said Peter Uvin, dean of the faculty and a co-chair of the PSR steering committee. “It’s very important that

whatever we do will be a deep understanding of what as a college we need and what we stand for in the long run.”

Mr. Gosch, who is on the student government’s diversity and inclusion board, said the board had been advocating for a new diversity-centered requirement. “And a lot of the time, the CMC administration just kind of brushed it off,” he said.

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Ms. Gray said that the administration wants to review all of the college’s general-education requirements in order to determine what a new requirement might look like and what goals and objectives it would meet. The college has been surveying existing courses that deal with topics like race and inequality, she said.

“If, after looking at that, we see, yeah, some type of requirement on diversity and inclusion would be impactful and necessary, I’m sure that’s the direction in which the college would go,” Ms. Gray said. “But if we look at it and see actually a lot of people are taking these classes already and maybe we need to develop a different way to achieve those goals, we would invite students to be a part of that process as well.”

Mr. Elliott said he had been working to refine a proposal for a new general-education requirement. Under the plan, students would be able to take existing courses that cover diversity issues like privilege and inequality and that can also satisfy other general-education requirements.

The plan is “nowhere near its final form, but it gave us a launch pad,” Mr. Elliott said. “It gave us something that we were able to talk about and we’re able to speak on.”

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To take effect, any proposal would have to be adopted by the college’s curriculum committee, the faculty, and the Board of Trustees.

“Clearly, stuff like that isn’t stuff that happens very rapidly,” Mr. Uvin said. “Fact is, it’s on the agenda. It’s being talked about, and that’s a good thing, I think. Fact is, it will take time.”

This month Claremont McKenna is bringing in two new administrators to help lead student-affairs and diversity efforts. Sharon Basso, who was dean of students at Lehigh University, in Pennsylvania, is Claremont McKenna’s new vice president for student affairs and dean of students, and Vincent Greer, who was an assistant dean at DePauw University, in Indiana, has been named the college’s new assistant dean of students for diversity and inclusion.

During the spring semester, candidates for both positions gave open presentations in a lecture hall on the campus, so students could meet them. The candidates also sat down for lunches and dinners with student groups like the diversity and inclusion board and the executive board of the student government.

The college then sent out anonymous surveys to collect the students’ opinions of the candidates.

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Ms. Garcelon said that although the college had collected student feedback, there could have been more communication about the hiring process. “There wasn’t much conversation with students and student organizers on why that decision was made, and there wasn’t any feedback that was made public to see what everyone was saying about these candidates,” she said.

Mr. Uvin acknowledged the difficulties of maintaining open communication with students. He said that although he understands students’ desire to be abreast of the administration’s diversity and inclusion efforts, it is sometimes necessary to keep discussions contained in committees.

“When it comes to certain things that are more sensitive — like, say, the creation of the resource center before we had some type of an agreement — you’re better off to maintain that conversation in a smaller group in order to have a fair degree of trust and capability for people to speak their minds honestly and openly and not feel that everything will right away be publicly discussed by everybody else,” Mr. Uvin said. “Some kind of more quiet work can be justified in order to get things done, in order to learn together and progress together.”

Mr. Chodosh, the president, said it is very difficult to communicate information to the public about proposals that have not yet been finalized.

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“We’d all like to see the product of our work done yesterday or today or maybe even tomorrow,” he said. “But to do an assessment well, and to interpret the data, to develop a good job description, to create the framework for a resource center of this ambition, takes time and energy, and the professionals and the committees that are working on it need that time in order to be able to do that job well.”

Mr. Elliott said he believes that since the protests in November, both administrators and students have been working to improve the relationship between the two groups, even if both sides are not quite satisfied.

“No matter what side you’re standing on, I think it’s really important to promote conversation,” he said. “Students created an environment where these conversations can happen, and I don’t think that would have taken place on its own.”

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