

Notes on “Rolling Out the Welcome Mat: Collaborating to Make Canton Safe and Welcoming for Everyone”
2/22/17, UU Church

Chaired by Bill Short, HEOP director at St. Lawrence Univ.

Panelists: Steve Peraza, an HEOP alum from about 8 years ago, now Ph.D. teaching American history at Buffalo State; Anabel Encarnacion (SLU), Karisma Griffith (SUNY), Iram Amin (SLU), Devine Pearson (SUNY Canton), Debra Joseph McEwan (SUNY Canton EOP director).

Bill. I gave the panelists two questions. 1) What were their experiences, both good and bad? 2) What would help improve matters for people in their situation?

Steve. For years, at SLU, there was nothing anyone could do to make it better for me. I was in a state of shock. Three suggestions for how it could be made better for students of color. 1) Give students coming to SLU/Canton from other backgrounds plenty of time to come to terms with their own feelings. 2) Educate your friends and families—confront racism and the ideology of race there first. 3) Be ready to hear pain.

Anabel. My experience hasn't been bad, but could have been better. Felt like I was negotiating everything—identity, how to behave, etc. I wear SLU gear when I go to Rite Aid so I don't get watched. At Walmart I get watched and followed. I had a bad experience at the Tick Tock—SLU security didn't help because they assumed I was a SUNY student, and the Canton police were useless. My favorite place is Nature's Storehouse. It has a good vibe.

Karisma. I was in Rite Aid with a friend who was swearing, and the employees started talking about “those people.” I felt excluded, put into a category. In Walmart a friend got a hard time while buying a BB gun—who are you, what are you going to use it for, etc.? Shopping in Save-A-Lot has been a positive experience—they make conversation and ask if you need help.

Iram. The ice cream shop was positive. I went to Sergi's without the hijab as an experiment and was with a black friend. Others were served and we weren't, so we left. In Canton I see people looking at me. The Partridge was a good place. At the Price Chopper I get the feeling I don't belong there—I smile, they don't smile back. I wouldn't feel safe working in a store in Canton. CC & More at the UU Church was good—conversation between people who are different. What needs to happen? Learn how to “Make the differences go away.”

Devine. I've been in town since 2012 and haven't really had negative experiences. But sometimes in PC or Sergi's I feel like I don't belong, so I don't stay. Otherwise, nothing but positive experiences in town—Save-A-Lot, the Dollar Store, the Bagelry. But on campus it's been different. I was called a faggot on FB and in my dorm.

Debra. We spend our time, as people of color, adapting, trying to fit in and be accepted. I've been profiled by police who followed my car from Gouveneur all the way into my driveway in Canton. There's only one race – the human race. We need to get to know each other.

Devine. How to feel safe, welcome, and included – it's a good goal to strive for, but probably impossible to reach. Diversity students can make things better if you look around, know where you are.

Iram/Anabel/Karisma. We need to increase diversity in the area and at the 4 colleges. SLU plays "The Single Story" Ted talk in LOTs of classes. It is good.

We need to learn how to drop assumptions about who someone is. Don't follow social media. Night is an especially anxious time.

Steve. It might help to have some kind of festival where people could talk about the urban settings that students come from. More smiling would help. A smile can make you feel more welcome. Make opportunities for diversity students to work or intern in stores in town and have constructive exchanges.

Audience contributions, with panelists commenting also.

This is an economically depressed area—not a lot of people are smiling. You're speaking to the choir here. Where are the owners of Sergi's, etc.?

Try supper clubs, find ways to get together over food.

Have an event similar to this one for the Chamber of Commerce and business members. Include Walmart manager/employees. Have the Chamber of Commerce hold trainings for its members.

The Village Code (#2332) prohibits using derogatory language to people on the streets. Tell security, police, a village trustee if you see that happening; call it in to the police. Have cards printed up with 2332 on them. Note: bystanders can report these too.

We need to be talking with law enforcement in our town and on our campuses.

Have cultural exchange events within the US context, not just international. Some event that puts urban and rural worlds into contact/contrast. More diversity at Clarkson and SUNY Potsdam. Clarkson now hosts a "world in Potsdam" event.

I'm a white woman, and I was ignored at Rite Aid when they saw that I was from SLU.

When you have a bad experience at a store – or when you see someone else being treated unpleasantly -- speak up. Discuss with the store manager. If necessary, mention you will take your business elsewhere. Debra commented on one very positive interaction she had with the Walmart manager, who took her complaint seriously and followed up.

Could students (and perhaps local people using EBT cards) work to make a short video-tape modeling what a good experience in a store looks like, and what an unwelcoming experience looks like. Share with businesses and ask them to use as a training video for their employees.

Let the managers of those stores know the feedback from this meeting.

Use your white privilege to put yourself out there and call out micro-aggressions and small belittlings that hurt.

Expand the opportunities and occasions when students can be introduced to businesses and the downtown. Make Stomp work better.

Improve the means of informing people in town and on the two campuses about events that would support diversity. E.G. – On March 10, the Islamic Culture Club at SLU is hosting a benefit for Syrian refugees. On March 11, the Hispanic Society is hosting an event at SLU. Who could host such a calendar? – Asso. Colleges? North Country This Week website? NCPR website/Community Calendar? Events in Canton and Potsdam.

Comments given after the panel –

Have a call list of volunteers who would take students to the grocery store or other shopping, esp. on the vacations.

Should the situation deteriorate, have volunteers who would be willing to accompany students shopping.

Have students from both colleges develop a handbook with useful information for newcomers – which stores are friendly, where can you buy certain products, who does hair cuts, etc.

We have volunteer hosts for international students at SLU (student not residing in the home but in contact, invited to dinner, holidays, shopping, etc.) This isn't terribly well known or well subscribed, but it could be pushed. Include US students for whom the North Country feels like a stay in a foreign place.

Resolution from village and town councils on being a welcoming community

Sharing more events between the campuses – SUNY Canton is offering dialog training now; Angel Davis is speaking at SLU in April

Do a questionnaire – who do diversity student interact with in the village? Then see if those shops, etc., would be willing to meet with the students in an informal setting to get to know each other.