

The Importance of Diversity and Inclusion: What that looks like at SUNY Potsdam

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Introduction

In this poster, I describe the importance of diversity and inclusion and what that looks like at SUNY Potsdam. Seeing as it is vital for universities to create inclusive environments for their students, I chose to research the history of the African American experience at SUNY Potsdam with a specific focus on how campus organizations, faculty/staff and the campus environment paved the way to creating a safe environment that recognizes all backgrounds. In this poster, I describe the results of my research, which shows the start of diversifying SUNY Potsdam and how various students of color created spaces for themselves.

Diversity in college is important for several reasons: it enriches the educational experience allowing for students to learn from each other's experiences; it promotes personal growth by allowing students to see past their own bias; it strengthens communities and allows a sense of community to develop. Diverse environments present students with the opportunity to critique and rethink their benefits; understand the beliefs and experiences of others; work through stereotypes and common misconceptions; prepare for the workforce and learn how to be socially and politically aware (*American Council on Education* 2012). Given its importance, my goal was to give a historical look at Potsdam's experience with diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Research Questions

- What is the history of diversity and inclusion at Potsdam from 1950 – 1980?
- How has Potsdam brought together students of different backgrounds and how have they adapted to accommodate them?
- Why is an inclusive and diverse campus important to a student's academic journey?

Methods

- Pioneer Yearbooks: I reviewed several yearbooks from 1950– 1980, in order to pinpoint the first students of color who attended SUNY Potsdam, their journeys and the emergence of clubs/ programs that represent the student body
- The Racquette: I was able to find old newspaper clippings from 1970 – 1980, that covered the campus culture
- "Diversifying SUNY Potsdam," exhibit: I was able to find more information on the first student of color to attend SUNY Potsdam and reasons behind the need to create an inclusive environment.



Figure 1. Photograph of Co '52 first years. Ed Taylor is in the second row in the middle (*Pioneer Yearbook* 1948)

Findings: Earliest Experiences

SUNY Potsdam first opened its doors in 1816, making it one of the oldest colleges in the United States. From 1816 – 1948 Potsdam was a predominantly if not white only school with no students of diverse backgrounds. As time progressed, Potsdam eventually opened its doors to students of all backgrounds.

In 1948 Ed Taylor became one of the first African American students to attend SUNY Potsdam. During his time at Potsdam, Taylor was a part of several clubs and organizations: Public performance committee (Fr Yr), Assembly concert committee, Finance committee, Collegiate Singers (Fr-Sr), SGA Treasurer (Jr), The Racquette (Sph-Sr), Men's Glee Club (Sph-Sr), College Band, Crane Chrous, The Choralaires (Sph-Jr), and Psi Phi (Jr) (*Pioneer Yearbooks* 1948-52).

Similarly, Booker Gibson (the first African American student to graduate from Potsdam) also proved to be an active part of the campus community, taking up membership in several clubs and organizations; The Racquette (Fr – Jr), Student Faculty association cabinet member, Assembly concert committee member, Member of Delta Kappa (Sph – Sr), SGA President in his senior year, Financial committee member, SGA cabinet member, Assembly committee member, Potsdam Pep Band (Sr) and Pi Delta Epsilon Member (Sr) (*Pioneer Yearbook* 1949–53).



Figure 2. Pi Delta Epsilon. Gibson is in the top left corner (*Pioneer Yearbook* 1953).

Findings Cont'd: 1950s / 1980s

Club participation was clearly important to Gibson and Taylor, and my research showed that it continued to be important to other Black students at Potsdam. The most popular clubs amongst African American students tended to be Crane/music-based clubs, athletics, Greek life, and later on the Afro American society.



FIGURE 3 & 4. African American student club participation 1950 – 1979 (*Pioneer Yearbooks* 1950-79)

The Afro American Society formed after the number of Black students increased in the late 1960s. The administration decided to increase the enrollment of minority students on campus, and in fall 1968, 25 African American students stepped foot on Potsdam's campus to start their college careers.

There was an assumption that due to prior experiences with other African American students, namely Booker Gibson, there would not be any significant problems with accepting a large number of African American students into a predominately white campus and town. This would later serve as a problem because the administration was not properly prepared for African American students.

In part to respond to these problems, the Afro American Society was formed in February 1969 with a membership of up to 33 students. They became the first organization on campus to make an active attempt to target racial attitudes on campus. The Afro American Society and Whites Against Racism (WAR) formed with the aim of bringing awareness to social issues that affected the campus (*Pioneer Yearbook* 1969).

On March 24, 1969, the Afro American Society declared that they were staging a sit-in due to treatment several African American students faced over several months on campus. Those experiences ranged from the administration's failure to prepare the community for the significant number of incoming students of color, physical altercations in town due to race, refusal of acceptance to an educational opportunity program, and outright racism from faculty, staff and other peers. This resulted in the administration making several recommendations to accommodate students of color, including: incorporation of problems relevant to Black society/ culture, bias training for faculty/ staff, an open dialogue with administration to bridge the gap of students needs and wants, the freedom of expression of culture and much more (*The Racquette* 1969).

The sit-in by the club allowed for the administration to start to mold itself around the African American community and try to create a space that was more welcoming and inclusive for them.

Discussion

Before the Afro American Society was formed in 1969, students of color immersed themselves in various other clubs that caught their attention, the most popular being Crane/music-based clubs and athletics. This could have been due to the fact that most of the first African American students were Crane students. In addition, African American students may have sought out club participation more generally to help create one's own sense of community and find people to help them transition into their new environment.

When the Afro American Society was formed in 1969, most if not all Black students were a part of the club. With the formation of the Afro American Society, one can infer that the students of color on campus wanted the chance to gain a sense of community and find a place on campus. This new society gave them a chance to be around people who understood the struggles of going to a PWI as a student of color. Now Potsdam is home to students of diverse backgrounds and minority groups who have found their own communities in the various clubs that have been founded. Clubs such as the Black Student Alliance, Soca Loca, GSA, SAGE, Native American Student Association and many more. These various clubs are home to many students who look for a place that represents who they are and gives them that place to fit in and be themselves

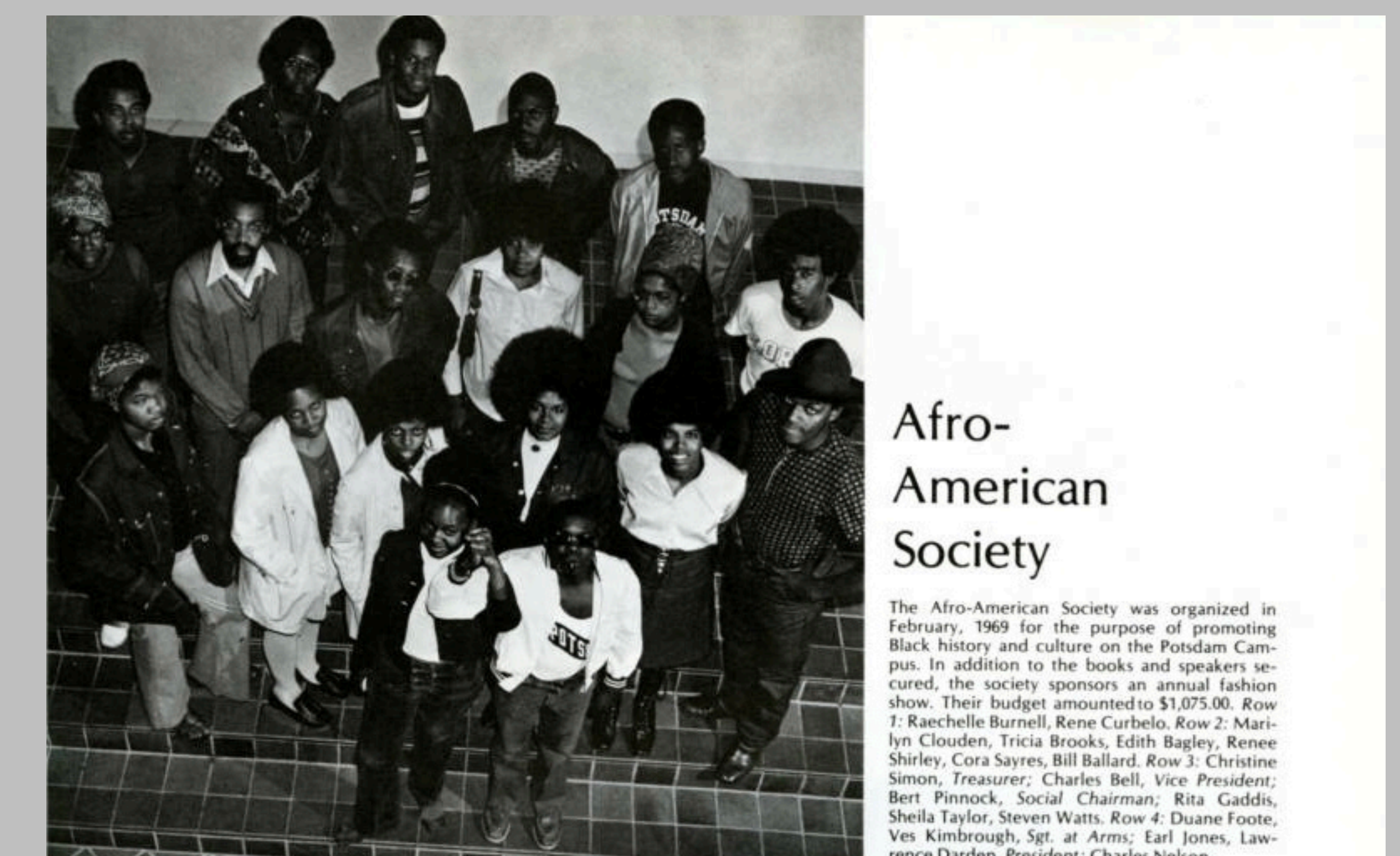


Figure 5. Afro American Society (*Pioneer Yearbook* 1972)

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion is an essential part of one's learning experience and personal growth. Being immersed in and surrounded by various cultures and backgrounds allows for one to grow and better understand the world around them. Diversity and inclusion in college not only introduces students to the real world, but it also allows students in underrepresented groups to find a place to call home and feel as though they are seen on campus. In order for students to feel at home or a sense of community on their college campus, there must be a sense of belonging for them. Students not only need to see and be around those of the same backgrounds but know that there are programs, initiatives, and incentives in place to truly welcome them and their needs. For 132 years Potsdam was home to a population of only white students, now it is home to students of various backgrounds and clubs that help to support them.

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