

**Cal Poly's Journalism Department:
An Analysis of Diversity and Inclusion**

Senior Project

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Introduction

According to the Constitution of the United States of America, “Congress shall make no law respecting establishment of religion, prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging in the freedom of speech or of the press...” (U.S. Constitution., amend. I). Essentially what this is saying is journalists, or the press, are protected by law. What journalists are required to cover, however, is not specified. This is important, hence the *freedom* portion, but this can also be problematic when it comes to telling the full story. In an article from Sonya M. Alemán, she discusses the role of Chicano/a students in journalism practice. She notes that “the nation’s free and democratic press should inform and represent all of its constituencies...however, research documenting the media under-representation of people of color indicate that unless journalists re-imagine the way they report on communities of color, those growing segments of immigrant, Spanish-speaking, and/or bi-ligual and bi-cultural communities may be left without a stake in the “public imaginary” (Alemán, 332). While journalists are able to give a voice to the voiceless, this may not always be the case, if they are not speaking to all communities and hearing all voices.

In this project, I plan to analyze what diversity and inclusion looks like in Cal Poly’s journalism department and how it compares to other universities and other programs. I speak with several students about their experience in the department and their views on the efforts made to improve diversity. I also break down the demographics and share insight into goals the department has for improvements in staff and curriculum.

Literature Review

Cal Poly State University requires students to take a U.S. Cultural Pluralism course, however it is not required that it be in their major. Some departments have taken steps to include this into the curriculum, such as the journalism department. “We value diversity in our major, especially because we're preparing a new generation of professionals to be aware of and sensitive to how communities are portrayed in the media,” journalism department chair Mary Glick says. At Cal Poly, journalism students have the option of taking either JOUR 219, Multicultural Society and the Mass Media or JOUR 401, Global Communication, to fulfill their Global and Cultural Perspectives requirement. The first teaches the role of the mass media in a democratic multicultural society, focusing on the portrayal and stereotyping of ethnic minorities by different mass media forms throughout U.S. history and the growing impact of minorities in the United States. “By digging deeper into their social fault lines, [students] are better equipped to approach stories and the people behind the stories with accuracy, fairness and truth, in a way that is inclusive,” JOUR 219 Professor Julie Lynem says. Global Communication, or JOUR 401, focuses on global communications facilities and operations, world transmission of information, survey of world wire services, and analysis of press operations under varying government ideologies, including third world countries. “In Global Communication, [students] learn to step out of [their] western bubble and try to see things from other perspectives and view journalism through different lenses,” JOUR 401 Professor Katya Cengal says. While both of these courses touch on the importance of storytelling from diverse perspectives, they only brush the surface. “We are still learning ourselves, and we are committed to doing a better job for our students,” Glick says. “We are ahead of some departments in this regard, but it's not a competition.”

Diversity and inclusion have been and continue to be challenges for the journalism department at Cal Poly, which stems largely from the University having low numbers of diverse students. Factors contributing to the lack of diversity within the university may be due to the distance Cal Poly is from major cities in California, as well as having the highest student fees in the CSU system, according to the journalism department's diversity statement and plan. This provides a framework and action steps for achieving an inclusive curriculum, diverse faculty and student population's and supportive climate, according to the Journalism Department's Diversity Plan from 2018. Some of Cal Poly's diversity efforts include a new Cal Poly Opportunity Fee, which was launched in fall of 2019, to address the costs of attending the university, which helps support the "Learn By Doing" motto focus. The university has also eliminated the Early Decision admission option, which hindered many students in low-income backgrounds who could not apply early. Still, in the past few years, Cal Poly has faced numerous incidents harming its reputation in regards to diversity efforts. In spring of 2018, a Cal Poly fraternity member posted a racially insensitive photograph of him wearing blackface, along with other photos that circulated with other members dressed in gangster stereotypes. Protests erupted all over campus and the story received national coverage.

Since this incident, the journalism department has taken steps to recruit a diverse student body to ensure an inclusive and welcoming experience for students as they enter Cal Poly, according to the Journalism Department's Diversity Plan. "We have an ambitious Diversity Plan in the department," Glick says. "We are ramping up our recruitment efforts for both students and new faculty and staff." The department is committed to accurate and authentic reporting and understands that both journalists

and public relations professionals need to develop cultural intelligence in order to do so. “Telling a story, any story, solely through the lens of upper-middle class white privilege is not telling the full story,” Glick says.

Compared to how diversity is addressed at other schools and in other programs, there is more that can be done. One school is even embedding multicultural education in their curriculum starting in kindergarten. The University of Alabama’s Department of Journalism & Creative Media has a multicultural program, called the Alabama Scholastic Press Association (ASPA), which seeks to empower K-12 newspaper, yearbook, newsmagazine, literary magazine and broadcast staff across Alabama. For 36, years, the ASPA has been committed to increasing diversity in America’s newsroom with its Multicultural Journalism program. It began in 1982 under Professor Marian Huttenstine and graduate student Marie Parsons as an idea to recruit and develop minority students for careers in journalism. Then in 1984, the first Minority Journalism Workshop was conducted. By 1993, several organizations including Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, the Freedom Forum, New York Times Foundation, Scripps Howard Foundation, and Mercedes-Benz International contributed to the program.

Cal Poly’s media outlet, Mustang Media Group, has worked to cover a variety of stories that are from diverse perspectives. Mustang News looks to hire skilled, compassionate, and dedicated people from a broad range of backgrounds, according to Editor in Chief Austin Linthicum. The organization used to be hyper-focused on building relationships with the cultural clubs on Cal Poly’s campus, but as Mustang News got to know leaders in some clubs, they found that there was very little interest in having a single club represent the voice of any particular student demographic on campus. Often, clubs on campus asked to be covered, but Mustang News found many

cultural organizations were much more focused internally on their members and had little desire to be included in the media. This shifted the organization's perspective on covering diverse groups on campus. "We used to think organizations were key to diversity in our coverage, we now are focused on including as many diverse voices as possible in every aspect of storytelling," Linthicum says. The organization tries to reflect as much as possible on what voices have been included in coverage and seek out stories that involve all groups on campus. In their coverage of the blackface incident, the staff took a hard look into the history of racist incidents on campus and in the following spring of 2019, the staff created a special edition paper, "A Year After Blackface" to address the issue that shook the campus. Furthermore, Linthicum emphasized the importance in reporting on diverse communities in the field of journalism because of the audience Mustang News reaches. Their mission, he says, is to ensure all voices are covered in the paper equally and all individuals feel represented.

Method

In order to gain a better understanding of diversity and inclusion in the journalism department at Cal Poly, I reached out to several students who identify as minority students. I, myself, am of a predominantly white background, and aside from being female, I feel fortunate to say I have not faced much inequality or discrimination in my life. I felt it would be only accurate to ask others their views on the matter.

For this section, I interviewed three students from diverse backgrounds: Monique Ejenkuo, Francisco Martinez, and Michael Barros. I asked them each the following questions:

- Why is reporting on diverse communities important in journalism, in your opinion?
- How does Mustang News tackle stories on diversity and inclusion? What kind of problems have reporters run into?
- How can MN improve their coverage of diversity and inclusion?
- What does our Journalism Dept/Cal Poly do well in terms of diversity/inclusion? What do we lack in/how can we improve?
- From what you know, how does our journalism program compare to other universities, in terms of diversity and inclusion?
- As someone with a diverse background, and one of the few in our dept, what should journalism students be learning? What classes/curriculum should be implemented/required?

The first student I interviewed was journalism senior Monique Ejenkuo. She is concentrating in public relations and is a first generation Nigerian American from Carson, California and uses the pronouns she/her/hers. She is one of the few, if not the

only black student in the journalism department. Ejenuko explained to me that the world in which we live is diverse and that news should reflect that reality. Ejenuko was the previous diversity editor for Mustang News and says the biggest problem with Mustang News reporters in covering diversity is that they need to report on communities of color or marginalized groups all of the time, not just during negative events. “Report outside of the people [you] know,” she says. Reporters and journalists need to do research on the communities on campus before starting a story. Regarding the campus at large, Ejenuko says that more diverse speakers need to be brought to campus. “Stop putting diversity initiatives on students of color and faculty of color,” she says. “The professors in our department need to stop putting ‘diversity’ on the syllabus as if it's a box to check off. White professors aren't doing much to instill principles of diversity.”

Next, I interviewed journalism junior Francisco Martinez, who was born and raised in San Francisco, California. He identifies as a straight, Mexican-American man and uses the pronouns he/him/his. He grew up in a single parent household with his mother, who is a Mexican immigrant. Spanish was his first spoken language and he still speaks it at home. Martinez says he was the only kid in his neighborhood who sounded “white” when speaking in English. He is primarily a sports reporter for Mustang News, but says as an organization overall, they tackle stories of diversity on a somewhat of a surface level. Oftentimes, reporters use sources from diverse backgrounds in their inclusive efforts in a passive way, Martinez says, by saying “give me a statement please” and don't follow up. “It's why, from my understanding, we have a problem with our reporters being treated somewhat curtly by those in the multicultural communities,” he says. “We use them as a quote and never find the story.” He also commented on the

wording of one of the questions, I, too, am not perfect, saying “If there's one thing I hate, it's having questions like these thrown at me as ‘one of the few’ persons of color in whatever situation,” he says. “I stress this because not every person of color is going to have the same answer to this question. I cannot speak on behalf of my Black, Latinx, Asian or Indigenous friends because I share little with them other than being a ‘student of color’.” His biggest message to journalism students was this: it is important to be aware of someone’s background. But it is equally as important, if not more, to treat them as one in the same. “We are all unique and different, Martinez says. “So please do not group us into one community of being a ‘person of color,’”

Finally, I interviewed journalism senior Michael Barros. Barros is a transgender non-binary student and uses the pronouns he/him/his. He identifies as pansexual, meaning that he is attracted to people regardless of gender. Barros was raised by a Portugese family in a small town of entirely immigrants and dairy farmers. He says that it is a common ingrained assumption that diverse stories are novelty, or “nice,” when in reality, it is life or death. “Journalists control the narrative of problems in this country, and shape the things people hear most about,” Barros says. There is also often an assumption, which is especially problematic right now, Barros says, that people of color and queer people cannot tell their own stories because they are inherently biased. “The truth is, we are the most vulnerable, and I believe wholeheartedly that journalism is meant to stand up and shine a light on injustices facing the most vulnerable,” Barros says. “It's news, it doesn't just apply to white people. We can tell stories about our community the best because we personally experience the struggles.” Barros says he feels Cal Poly’s journalism department has done a good job in their diversity and inclusion efforts. “When I came out, all of my professors immediately jumped to use my

correct name and pronouns,” he says. Barros added that the department would benefit from a class such as breaking down the *1619 Project*, developed by the News York Times with the goal to re-examine the legacy of slavery in the United States. “Because Cal Poly has so many affluent, white students, it's important that they understand social justice movements,” Barros says. He also stressed the importance of pronouns and says he would like to see the department require students to ask sources for their pronouns. Additionally, Barros stressed the importance of journalists being educated on social justice and civil rights movements, such as Supreme Court decisions, transgender protection rights, ICE detainment policies, and immigration.

Findings

After speaking with many students, one simple message has come to my attention: Cal Poly's Journalism Department has made improvements, especially given the overarching diversity issue on campus and in San Luis Obispo, but it does not stop there. More needs to be done. The journalism department's public accountability shows the breakdown of the number of journalism bachelor degrees awarded to students based on their gender, ethnic grouping and ethnic origin. In the 2017-2018 academic year, under-represented minorities made up 18.6% of the department. This is pretty consistent since the 2012-2013 academic year, but a big drop off from the 2014-2015 academic year, when the number was at 30.6%. In terms of ethnic origin, those numbers are even lower. In the 2017-2018 academic year, 15.1% of students were Hispanic/Latino, 1.2% were African American, 0% were Native American, 5.8% were Asian American, 2.3% were multi-racial, and 72.1% were white. This is not diverse. More than 70% of students being white does not create a diverse and inclusive atmosphere, in a department of less than 300 students.

I spoke with Ejenuko and Martinez about how they think Cal Poly's journalism department compares with other schools, to get perspective from them on what change could be done. Ejenuko says that there need to be more opportunities to get exposure to diverse people and events. "USC has lots of avenues for students of color and other marginalized groups in journalism," she says. "Journalism students should take ethnic study classes especially since Cal Poly and SLO are predominantly white." Martinez, too, was very passionate about the systemic changes that need to be addressed. He stressed how minority groups get overlooked and the importance of covering "diverse" groups, who are marginalized by the institutions on which this country has built itself, he says.

“This nation, time and time again, has continued to overlook and oppress all marginalized groups. It doesn't matter if you're Black, Asian, Latinx, indigenous, LGBTQ+, disabled, or poor. You likely will face adversity if you fall into any of those above categories. Slavery, Japanese internment camps, children locked up in cages in the name of ‘border security’ — these are some of the highlights some of the things this country has done against marginalized groups. If we're meant to serve as a watchdog and a keen observer on those in power, which has not always been the case among our media, then we need to report on communities that aren't white and middle-to-upper class.” Martinez also commented on the demographics of the school and how they do not match those of California. “It's important to report on diversity because of the lack of it that exists here, too.

As previously mentioned, Mustang News has attempted to diversify their own group to extend their coverage and cast a wider net to multiple organizations on campus. The group had a Diversity and Inclusion Editor in the 2017-18 school year, Monique Ejenuko, but that backfired and she, too, has criticized the role in the past, Martinez says. “While there have been efforts to include a sort of Cross Cultural Centers reporter in the past ... it's way more focused on whatever hierarchies Cal Poly is trying to put into place to showcase their diversity efforts,” he says. “We cover so many things that seem really cool, and are really cool. These stories often get their start because they seem mundane, even when they're not. But rarely do I ever see one of a person of color or of a queer person, or any group that isn't white, straight and able-bodied cover the stories of those in these communities, because all I see are stories in these diverse communities.”

This year, I was tasked with creating a recruitment video for my job with the journalism department. This assignment was something I had a lot of concerns about, given the message we were trying to put out. The video was sent to Cal Poly's partner high schools whose students identify primarily as low-income, minority, and first-generation students. My job was to create a video recruiting those groups of students. The only way to really recruit someone is to find a connection with them, something they can relate to. I worked with our department chair, Mary Glick and on this project and her instructions often made me feel like what I was doing was unethical. Disclosure: I am from a news background, so any sort of "staging" a shoot for a marketing video feels wrong to me. She had me handpick certain students and professors to profile in the video, those of color, to make it seem, what I felt like, we had a diverse department. This seemed wrong to me. We should not be putting out a message that every other student in a classroom is from a diverse background, i.e. not white, if that is not in fact true. Being told to single out people to film, such as Professor Yan Shan and Monique Ejenuko was uncomfortable to me and I had to make it seem like I was filming other students too, and not targeting just them for our video. The language in the video was very marketing and promoting our major, trying to persuade students to come, but the goal of the visual impact, the video I got, was to show "see, we do have minority students here," which is not necessarily true. Originally the feedback was I had "too many" students of color in the video. This was a challenging and often unethical project I was tasked with and I am still uncertain what kind of message this puts out to those schools. I also wonder, what is the true reason for recruiting and wanting more diverse students, in the department's eyes. Is it because there needs to be a more inclusive culture and

some faculty and students of color don't feel unsafe? Or is it because white faculty members feel guilty and want their demographic numbers to look better.

**Final video can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxUuDKfsfHA&t=3s>*

Conclusion

After several months of tweaking my topic, I can now say that diversity and inclusion, and more than just that buzzword term we hear too often, is incredibly important to the culture in our department, in our college campus, in our community, and in our lives. When I first started this project in spring of 2019, I was quite uncertain what the goal of my message was. It started out with the video and I felt like I needed to make a larger impact by creating my senior project based on it. Now, I understand, especially given the climate of our country. People need to educate themselves to understand the differences in people and recognize longstanding history of inequality and injustice. So often people think, well someone of color has a better chance of getting into college because they can check more boxes. While this is maybe true to some degree, the reason for it is because so much damage has been done and it will never truly be erased.

Within the journalism department, there has been an effort to make change, or so I felt there was in my four years of attendance. Multicultural Society and the Mass Media was an incredibly eye opening class for me, and I think every student and truly every human being should be required to take a course that breaks them out of their white or straight or privileged bubble, to give some perspective on things and to make them have uncomfortable conversations. This project has helped me realize that many students, while they may have a smile on their face, don't always feel accepted into their college, culture, or community. It is crucial that education continues and that as journalists, we continue the fight to cover all angles, ensure all voices are heard, and tell the truth about those whose stories we are lucky enough to share.

Author's Note

**The following are my additional thoughts during the time of crisis our country is in. Much has unfolded during the time of writing my paper and I felt it was absolutely necessary to include. I wanted to share my own feelings on this subject, as I often can't as a journalist.*

I started writing this paper during the winter quarter of 2020. At this time, the world was a different place and it is important to acknowledge that in this paper. For a while, I was unsure as to what my senior project was about, but after recent events and having a full two quarters to finish this, I truly feel passionate about this topic.

In March of 2020, the coronavirus, or COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. Hard. Schools across the world ended or transitioned to “virtual” or online courses. Stores and businesses closed, people lost their jobs, and millions were infected, killing thousands. As of June 4, there is no cure, no solution, no vaccine. Society has learned to social distance, work from home, and shelter in place during these unprecedented times. The streets are eerie with nobody on them, and for those who are, they walk alone, with a mask shielding their face.

At the end of May, things got worse. George Floyd, a black man, was killed in Minneapolis due to police brutality at the hands of Derek Chauvin, and several other officers at the scene including Thomas Lane, Tou Thao, and J. Alexander Kueng. This story was certainly by no means the first incident of police brutality and racism, but the movement following, #justiceforGeorgeFloyd, caught the nation's attention, something, I believe, has never truly occurred. Protests, rallies, and often, riots, erupted across the country and, at times, the world, starting in Minneapolis, where Floyd was killed, after having his neck kneed on by former officer Chauvin, and Floyd yelling “I can't breathe.”

Remember, all of this was happening at a time when the county was more divided than ever, and the political climate was incredibly negative under President Donald Trump.

As a journalist, and having started my job at KSBY as a reporter, was unlike anything I ever imagined. My first day out I covered one of many protests in San Luis Obispo, and got to witness protestors kneel outside the San Luis Obispo Police Department for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the time Floyd was on the ground and could not breathe, and for a moment, law enforcement officers taking a knee too, to show their support. This was something I had only seen on the news, and to see in person, my first day in the field, was something I will never forget.

It is times like this where society remembers the importance of educating themselves of social injustice and the longstanding history of systemic racism, violence, segregation, discrimination, and oppression in this country. Many, mostly white people, do not understand the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and simply think that it should instead be #AllLivesMatter. Lyndon B. Johnson said it best, "You can't shackle and chain someone for hundreds of years, liberate them to freely compete with the rest, and still justly believe that you've been fair."

I am a white woman and this movement has made me realize the privilege I have due to the color of my skin. I am working to continue to educate myself on the social injustice that exists in our country, the long standing efforts to make change, and the history of racism and oppression. White privilege is not to say my life hasn't been hard, but it means my skin color has not contributed to the difficulty in my life.

My four years at Cal Poly, but more importantly the past few months in the world, have shown me how important it is to be a journalist and to truly embody what

that means -- not only as a reporter, looking and sounding good on air, getting good footage -- but more so, to be a journalist, a storyteller, and to give a voice to the voiceless. At times I have felt uncomfortable at these protests when people yell cuss words, saying the news is terrible, and on top of that being white and wanting to show my support, while still doing my job, but I have learned that in addition to educating myself, what I can do is to use my work for good. I feel so lucky to be able to give a platform to those who need to be heard — those who are angry, tired, scared, and confused. I hope to make change with the people I meet, the voices I hear, and the stories I am able to share.

All this is to say, that to whomever is reading this, however many years it has been since 2020, the topic of my paper is still relevant. Diversity and inclusion within the journalism department is crucial. But more than that, equality in society. Is every man truly created equal? There is so much damage done in history in terms of race and oppression, and I truly don't know if it can be changed. It certainly won't be forgotten.

Resources

Cal Poly Journalism Department. (2018) *Diversity Plan*. Internal report. Unpublished.

Chicano/a Student Journalists Map Out a Chicana/o Journalism Practice by Sonya M. Alemán

U.S. Constitution., amend. I