

Many Voices

... A Publication of the Multicultural Advisory Council

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Mount St. Mary's College

Multicultural Advisory Council

Progress Report for 1994-95 and
Projections for 1995-96

This year the Multicultural Advisory Council (MAC) promoted multicultural awareness and concerns through two channels: campus-wide multicultural programs assessment and the multicultural newsletter.

The MAC continued to work with the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) in its assessment of all-campus multicultural projects. We assisted in the development of the "M" course evaluation proposal and the analysis of data from the Freshman/Senior Interview, Campus Climate Survey, and Sophomore/Senior Survey. Special thanks to Stephanie Cubba for her leadership throughout our many meetings.

The MAC produced two editions of the multicultural newsletter, *Many Voices*, during the spring 1995 semester. Improvements included an enhanced desktop format and the integration of reader responses and faculty, staff, and student articles from both campuses. We wish to acknowledge the efforts of the Editorial Committee: Tracy Poon, Stephanie Cubba, Mary Kranz, Alice Molina, and Carla Bartlett. Special thanks to Tracy Poon who created a professional look for the newsletter through her computer wizardry.

Next year the MAC plans to publish three editions of the newsletter and to continue to support the OIR in its multicultural assessment projects.

Choosing Our Words

by Anne Eggebrotten
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We use labels all the time—identifying ourselves and others by shorthand when we don't have time for deeper communication. *White, female, married* tells a lot in a few words.

The question is—*which labels to use?* Some are insults, while others are acceptable. Some are downright errors.

One of the mistakes still circulating is the term *Oriental*. It once made sense for Europeans to refer to Asians as *Oriental* because the term means "in the direction of the rising sun" (Latin, *oriens*). But today in the U.S. and especially in California, Asia is closest in the direction of the setting sun. We could call everyone west of us *Occidentals*—but the term *Asian* is much better. It is not rooted in the idea of "us here" and "them over there."

Also in the error category, *Indians* was once acceptable but now is less so. We have learned to be specific about Hopi or Lakota, referring to an individual's nation, or to use the term *Native American*. But in a recent interview, author Suzan Shown Harjo of Cheyenne

and Muscogee descent says she prefers to use *Native People* (Los Angeles Times, Nov. 27, 1994, page M3). She notes that some "Americans" who have been here for many generations consider themselves natives. Native Hawaiians is an example of one group that could also be seen as Native Americans.

Like *native*, the word *indigenous* is also clearly acceptable and accurate. Let's use it more. There are indigenous tribes in many parts of the world, like the Tarahumara in the mountains of Chihuahua, Mexico,

just south of El Paso, Texas. This native group, like others in the state of Chiapas and in Guatemala, faces discrimination and poverty within the larger

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culture. The general term *Mexican* does not capture the complexity of this cultural group.

On Thanksgiving Day we got news of 113 people killed during a human rights demonstration in Nagpur, India. I was surprised to learn that in India there are many poor, uneducated tribes. The word for them in Hindi is *adivasis*, and it means "original inhabitants"—

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Words: What's in a Name?

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people who were there long ago and have been pushed back to central highlands and forests by the groups who control India today. This pattern of newcomers taking over and oppressing the indigenous peoples appears to be worldwide.

Some terms came into use for the convenience of governments. *Hispanic* is one such term, adopted during the Nixon administration, according to some sources. It was a way of lumping together Spanish-speaking people of North, South, and Central America. But some of these people object to the emphasis on Spain in this term; they feel that it does not reflect the indigenous aspect of their heritage. Today many prefer the term *Latino*, partly because it does come from their language itself, Spanish being a Latin-based language. But as we see in the essay by Annabel Valenzuela (please see Volume 4, Issue 1), a person from a specific heritage such as Mexican or Salvadoran may feel very uncomfortable suddenly being told to identify with everyone in the category *Latino*. *Mexican-American* or *Chicano* (probably a short version of *Mexicano*) may be preferable. Mexicans also use the term *La Raza* to reflect the new race of people combining both European and indigenous roots.

Black Americans are the group for whom we have seen the most change in labels in recent U.S. history. Some people prefer to be called

African-Americans, while others don't like a hyphenated identity that doesn't distinguish between recent immigrants and those who have been here for 300 years. The terms *Negro* and *colored people* are definitely outdated, yet using *people of color* to refer to all non-Europeans is popular.

And who really identifies with the term *Caucasian*? I don't even know where the Caucasus Mountains are. I don't mind the terms *Euro-Americans* or *Anglo*—but *white*? When I hold my hand against a piece of white paper, I know I'm not white. Likewise, the label *Black* gets applied to people who have a whole spectrum of skin shades.

The word *American* itself is a problem. We hear it used to refer to citizens of the United States of America—or to European-looking U.S. citizens. But South Americans, Central Americans, and our North American neighbors (Canadians and Mexicans) are also Americans. How did the U.S. get exclusive use of the term Americans? Many people living south of our border call us *norteamericanos*, a label that is geographically accurate. It may be a while before we change our language habits in this area, but one step in the right direction would be to refer to our nation as the U.S. rather than as *America*.

Many times it's possible to choose a more specific rather than a more general term. For example, use Koreans or Japanese or Samoans rather than making gen-

eral statements about Asians. Sometimes the most appropriate thing to do is to ask a person what term he or she prefers—if any!

The ethnic variety within Asia, Africa, and Latin America is tremendous, just as in Europe and the U.S. Mitsuye Yamada is known as a Japanese-American author, but when we heard her speak at the Mount two years ago we learned that actually her family is from a specific ethnic group within Japan and she has a grandmother from Okinawa. Many Filipino citizens are ethnically Chinese or Vietnamese. My friend Edina Takeda is Brazilian—but her family came to Brazil from Japan.

Another subtle point about labels is that people within a group sometimes use terms affectionately among themselves that they would not want others outside their group to use. Some native people feel comfortable using the term *Indian* when speaking English to each other. The names commonly used for tribes may also have derogatory origins from outside the tribe; examples are the Sioux and the Navajo peoples. Navajos use the term *Diné* to refer to themselves in their own language, which means The People. Interestingly, other tribes' names for themselves also translate as The People.

The words we choose evoke many feelings. *Many Voices* invites you to tell us which labels you hate, and which you prefer to use to identify yourself ethnically or in other ways. Write to us with your views.

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