

# MSUs Michael Fagin: Diversity is his goal

By Robb Murray, Free Press staff writer [story published by The Free Press]

John Cross



One of Michael Fagin's biggest roles at MSU is mentoring students of color. Here he sits in a meeting of the MSU chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

MANKATO — The year was 1970 and Michael Fagin, born and raised in Detroit, was on the cusp of revolutionizing the way Mankato State College handled diversity.

He was tapped back then to run the new Minorities Groups Studies Center, a venture by the college to address the need for more awareness of the new ethnic realities on campus. More students of color were coming to Mankato, prompting more issues of diversity.

"I was scared," Fagin said of that time in his life. "We didn't know which direction we were going."

More than 30 years later, Mankato State College is Minnesota State University. And Fagin is again asked to lead the charge as the institution grapples with a new set of diversity issues.

Last month, MSU President Richard Davenport announced a pair of new titles for Fagin: dean for Institutional Diversity and special assistant to the president for Multicultural Relations. Both signal a new era both for Fagin and for MSU.

"He truly is the person we'd single out on campus as being a leader for diversity," Davenport said.

For Fagin, 61, it is a time to assert top-level leadership on issues he's championed for decades. And MSU - where Davenport has said diversity is one of his top priorities - now appears poised to take definite steps toward tackling some of its diversity shortcomings.

## Humble beginnings

Fagin said this when asked about his home life as a child: "We were upper lower class." His grandfather was from Kentucky and instilled pride in his family. According to Fagin, his family "would never take a penny of welfare."

He was born in Detroit where he attended predominantly black public schools and played baseball and basketball and ran for the cross country team. Upon graduation he attended Dillard University in New Orleans. He transferred later to Wayne State University where he earned a bachelor's degree.

Fagin first became associated with Mankato State College in the late 1960s when he took off-site classes in Minneapolis to earn a special certification in deaf education. Later, he came to campus to earn a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling.

He'd later earn a doctorate in educational psychology from the University of Minnesota, but that would be years after he established himself in Mankato.

## Minority Center

In 1969, a task force from the Black Students Union at Mankato State College came up with an idea. They wanted something done on campus to make the environment more inclusive. They wanted more faculty of color, more students of color, they wanted better retention of both, and they wanted diversity addressed within the curriculum.

Enter the Minorities Groups Studies Center. Mankato State professor George Ayers knew Fagin because he taught one of the off-site classes Fagin took while pursuing his deaf education certification. Ayers approached Fagin about the center, and Fagin took the job.

Within a few years Fagin was taking the program beyond its original goals. He focused on the total student, not just the classroom. They implemented programs in the residence halls to help students of color adjust, and he personally mentored hundreds of students over the years.

He also began to teach. Over the years he's taught African-American studies, American racial minorities, urban minority problems, cultural pluralism and many others. Early on Fagin created a major in minority studies. He also developed a graduate program in minority studies. The annual Pan-African Conference, a gathering that attracts people from around the United States, is another Fagin creation.

In 1991 Fagin was named associate vice president for cultural diversity, where he reported to the vice president for student affairs. He said for years he's been trying to get his department moved to the academic affairs side of MSU, but was unsuccessful with former longtime vice president Margaret Healy and Denise Schlake, whose quick tenure ended when Davenport reassigned her last month.

Fagin also has been a key figure off campus for diversity issues. He serves on diversity committees and was one of the pioneers behind Mankato's annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. His most visible off campus endeavor, though, came with a gun strapped to his hip.

He was known as a friend to students of color, someone they could come to in times of need. Some of those students came to Fagin via phone calls from the local jail. He'd go, bail the student out and help the student get back on track.

"Some of them weren't even students," Fagin said.

He'd also question the authorities, wondering why so many students of color were being arrested. Then one day, the authorities put a question to Fagin.

"Someone said, 'If you're so concerned, join our force and give us some presence,'" Fagin said. "My wife said 'Yes,' and I looked at her and said, 'What are you talking about?'"

His wife won, and both Fagins became certified peace officers and part-time members of the Mankato Police Department. Carol Fagin lasted about three years. Michael Fagin spent 23 years on the force until he retired five years ago.

### **Big changes**

But with Schlake's reassignment came another reassignment, this time for Fagin. At the same time Davenport announced the Schlake decision, he announced he'd promoted Fagin to the posts of dean of institutional diversity and special assistant to the president. And with the new titles came the switch he'd been pushing for. Davenport had moved cultural diversity from student affairs to academic affairs.

"I really did not know it was coming," Fagin said. "It was music to my ears to hear (that the department would be moved to academic affairs). I didn't know there'd also be a promotion."

Now is the hard part. He's been pushing for this kind of move for years and now it's here. Fagin hopes he can produce results, i.e. more faculty and students of color attracted to MSU, and more of them retained.

"A lot of minorities who come to MSU see that it is not a place where minorities are easily accepted," said Myron Medcalf, editor of the student newspaper and outspoken critic of diversity both on and off campus. "We're improving. A lot has happened this year. Fagin's promotion will help that."

Medcalf, who said he considers Fagin a mentor, said he's hopeful for positive change because Fagin's new position will allow him regular visits with the MSU deans. From that could come a big impact on hiring faculty of color and on incorporating diversity into the curriculum.

Davenport, who announced even before he was hired that enhancing diversity was among his top priorities, said Fagin is the right person to help MSU deal with some of its diversity issues. A few months ago Davenport said he's heard stories from people that reveal MSU isn't as open to people of color as he'd like it to be.

"Being a predominantly white institution and a predominantly white community, we need to work a little harder to attract under-represented populations," Davenport said. "Racial relations is a very special area I want to keep my finger on. I need somebody who can keep me informed on a regular basis."