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By Shaun Harris

The Office for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI) has been on campus for six months. So let's see what it has accomplished so far.

Dr. Carmaletta Williams, a 20-year veteran of the English faculty and a published Langston Hughes scholar, was installed as the college's chief Diversity Officer by Dr. Calaway; five Diversity Fellows have been installed (Dr. Kami Day, Professor Samira Hussein, Lisa Cole, Amber Smith, and myself) with several more to come this fall; a Multicultural Center Director has been approved by the Board and will soon be hired and installed in our new Multicultural Center (Danny Alexander will be the interim Multicultural Center Director this year.); the Diversity Fellows and Dr. Williams have drafted a mission statement and goals and objectives, which will soon be featured on the new diversity Web site and diversity newsletter (You're reading it.); and, for the 2008-2009 academic year, speakers and "monthly diversity conferences" are being planned and organized around a broad spectrum of diversity, including: autism, Latino culture, Native American cultures, religious diversity, the sustainability movement, Black history month, LGBT culture, etc.

So why is this only a beginning, or potentially, no progress at all?

Let's start with this year's exciting new diversity programming. How many students, faculty, staff, board members, and administrators will attend a session at the autism conference on October 17? Two hundred people? As many as 400? If a speaker was hosted in the Craig Community Auditorium (233 GEB) and every seat was filled, would the event be a success?

On one level, the answer would be yes. However, if one considers that there are more than 1,500 faculty and staff at JCCC, more than 17, 000 students every semester, and hundreds of administrators all around campus, 400 attendees would not even be sufficient to say that a sizable percentage of the campus community attended the event.

One goal of the autism conference, besides helping us understand better the issues that people with autism face on a daily basis, is to bring autism within the spectrum of diversity that is valued at JCCC and help people

with autism feel welcome and safe everywhere on campus. The conference, this diversity programming, cannot achieve this goal, however, if the participation rate is only a small percentage of the entire campus community.

Those of us who do diversity work know that, too often, it is those who are already supportive and informed who attend diversity programming and those who are not as supportive or informed that decide not to attend. Of course there are plenty of good reasons why it is difficult to attend diversity programming at JCCC. For students, this is a commuter campus: they have jobs, families, and homework waiting for them when they finish class; staff and administrators have important work to do and already over-burdened schedules; faculty may not see how diversity (or this type of diversity) fits into their curriculum or class goals. Given these very real constraints and obstacles, it is a wonder that any of us has time to do any additional tasks, let alone tasks with a diversity focus.

However, if the goal (as the new mission statement for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion states), is to "create and nurture a campus climate where all feel safe and welcome, where difference is valued and respected, where students, faculty, staff, community members, and guests experience diversity in all aspects of campus life," then everyone must participate. Everyone affects campus climate. To really make a change to campus climate, ideally, everyone would need to attend the autism conference, do follow-up reading and research, and devote some work time to plan and implement ways to make JCCC more accessible and welcoming to autistic people.

But here's the rub: education and awareness about autism is not enough. There is the Latino community to learn more about, the Black community, the LGBTQIA community – the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and ally community– the Muslim community, Native American communities, the disability community. And the list goes on, each community needing a long-term educational commitment and a personal transformation from each of us. It is only here that we begin to understand the enormity of the task of transforming JCCC to a place where diversity is a lived reality, a functional part of how the college operates.

There are a couple of important side notes here. First, as I heard a speaker say at NCORE 2008 (the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity), the institution's leaders need to ensure that its strategic goals and objectives related to diversity are implemented on the operational level. In other words, if administrators don't give release time and financial support for staff to pursue diversity education at work (It is unreasonable to expect employees to do this education without pay or away from the workplace.), or if administrators and faculty do not make diversity education part of their job descriptions and performance evaluation, then any institutional goal related to diversity will, in practice, fall short [replacing: "fail"].

Second, because the needs of many diversity groups are not verbalized for various and complex reasons, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that some people believe the campus is already welcoming and safe for members of various diversity communities, or that they personally behave in ways that are welcoming. However, the only way to know this for sure is to ask for feedback from those within that particular community.

This lead to the importance of assessment to determine the relative success of any diversity initiative. For assessment related to diversity, it is critical that 1) those within the various diversity communities actively participate in shaping the assessment apparatus and interpreting the data created, and 2) the assessment needs to be continuous and ongoing, ideally established with the assistance of a campus climate professional fluent in the functional needs of many diversity communities.

So what conclusions do I draw from this analysis?

I conclude that diversity programming is only the starting point for diversity education. Diversity programming, though important, is only as successful as the percentage of the entire campus community who attends. I conclude that diversity education is hard work that requires a long-term commitment from us and long-term support from the institution. Finally, I conclude that a transformed campus climate around diversity needs the participation and assistance of everyone at the institution to be successful.

For more information, contact Shaun Harris, assistant professor of English and co-advisor for the Queers and Allies Student Club.