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## Who Are Those Diversity Fellows and What Are They Up To?

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Kami Day

## **Abstract**

The Diversity Fellows at Johnson County Community College are participating in a number of activities to raise awareness and organize events to further the ODEI.

**KEYWORDS:** diversity fellows

# WHO ARE THOSE DIVERSITY FELLOWS AND WHAT ARE THEY UP TO?

by Kami Day



The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is so far comprised of nine people working hard to carry out the ODEI's mission: Executive Director Carmaletta Williams, Multicultural Center Program Director Danny Alexander, administrative assistants Kay Rozell and Susan McGarvey, and five Diversity Fellows. But what

exactly is a Fellow? The etymology of the term involves the concept of partner, and the definition that best fits each of us is "member of a group having common interests, as a member of a learned society."<sup>1</sup> The ODEI is charged with effecting culture change at JCCC, and we Fellows have a common interest – are partners – in that exciting work. But how did we get here and what do we do?

The first three Fellows, Shaun Harris, Samira Hussein and I, were asked by President Calaway to act as advisers to Carmaletta as she began the task of setting up the ODEI; the three of us were already engaged in diversity education and cultural competence work, and he assumed, correctly, that we would welcome a role in the office we had looked forward to for some time. Lisa Cole, an accounting professor, had been co-chairing the committee to increase minority faculty and staff, a group that is part of the larger Strategic Planning Committee, so Carmaletta asked her to serve as the liaison between the ODEI and Strategic Planning. Amber Smith, whose focus is student recruitment, is a math professor who joined us after Jeff Frost and Mary Deas recommended her to Carmaletta. We came together rather quickly because we wanted to launch the ODEI without delay, but we are discussing how the Fellow roles will be filled in the future. We envision positions with a term limit and some kind of application process. Right now, in addition to Amber from math, three of us (Shaun, Danny and I) are from the English department (Carmaletta's department as well before she became the executive director), and Samira and Lisa are from business. We hope in the future that the Fellows will better represent departments and offices from across campus.

Each Fellow has three credit hours of release time to do the work of the ODEI, and our interests and responsibilities vary.

- Samira is working on the Festival of Faiths Project scheduled for January 2009; conducting workshops for

Blue Valley school district; serving as a liaison in her role with community groups, especially Muslim organizations; and maintaining an ongoing connection with the International Education office, which gives her an opportunity to connect with different international programs on and off campus.

- Lisa is working on strategies for increasing the number of minority applicants, the number of minorities interviewed and, eventually, the number of minorities hired. Please see her article in this issue for more about the importance of recruiting for a diverse faculty and staff.
- Amber has several projects in the works, including a minority recruiting symposium to be held at JCCC in March; creating summer programs for high school students that emphasize a workforce/academia partnership; securing Title V funds to aid minority students who need additional support (academically and socially); establishing our internal financial aid system (work-study program); and creating joint financial partnerships with universities to make sure our students – when they transfer – do graduate.
- Shaun's focus is on helping all members of the JCCC community to become aware, respectful and appreciative of cultural differences and to develop skills to function effectively and appropriately in a multicultural world. One of his projects is researching various individuals and organizations that conduct campus climate surveys focusing on diversity; his goal is to send out an RFP by the end of 2008 and to select the candidate by January. As co-adviser to Queers and Allies, he has been involved in panel presentations to 12 classes with the Q and A student Speak Out group, and he will continue to co-facilitate Safe Space workshops<sup>2</sup> under the aegis of the ODEI. He will also make himself available to groups across campus for cultural competence education.
- My focus is also cultural competence, and I am working with Shaun on the campus climate survey and on Speak Out and LGBT education. I have also been reviewing software as a possible way to help faculty, staff and students increase their cultural competence and am working specifically with the nursing program to find software designed for health professionals. In November, I was part of a panel that addressed inclusive health care. I will also work with Samira on workshops for Blue Valley School District.

In order to be sure our own education and training are up to date, we all attend conferences and workshops. Last January Shaun and I were preparing to attend the Lesbian and Gay Task Force Conference, *Creating Change*, in Detroit when we learned Carmaletta had accepted her new position. One week before the conference, we invited her to come with us, and she accepted our invitation. *Creating Change* is an intense conference attended by LGBT activists and leaders, and all three of us participated in workshops all day every day for four days. I tell this story to illustrate Carmaletta's support and her willingness to show, with her own actions and desire to learn, that our office does indeed define diversity inclusively.

A team of us attended the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) in May, a conference that this year focused particularly on the intersections of race and class and on white privilege. This semester, several members of our group attended the Challenging Power and Privilege Conference, others attended the Diversity Now faculty recruitment seminar, and some traveled to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) conference. I can't speak for everyone, but I return from these conferences edified and inspired but also with an acute sense that I will never know enough.

In the spirit of the office in which we work, we should note we in the ODEI are three straight African American women, two straight White men, one straight woman whose country of origin is Pakistan, two straight White women, and one White lesbian. We are all (at present) middle-class, well-educated, and more or less able-bodied. We represent a variety of religious beliefs (and nonbeliefs) and a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. As far as diversity of ideas, we are all over the map, and if you read Danny's article in this issue, you will see I have barely scratched the surface. The lively and sometimes challenging conversations in our weekly meetings examine our own assumptions and attitudes, knowledge gaps, commitment and the strengths we each bring to our work. We enjoy success, we make mistakes, and we move on, sometimes painfully aware of the perils of on-the-job-training. We are committed to personal and institutional transformation, and we hope our colleagues and students will join us on this journey.

1 Morris, William, ed. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

2 The Safe Space project aims to create safe spaces for LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender). The training involves discussion, activities and materials that help raise awareness about LGBT people and the issues that affect their lives, and each participant leaves with a Safe Space sticker they can display if they choose.

