Many Voices - One Community

Volume 1
Issue 4 *Spring 2010*

Article 4

4-1-2010

"We're Only as Diverse as Our Curriculum"

Jim Leiker
Johnson County Community College, jleiker@jccc.edu

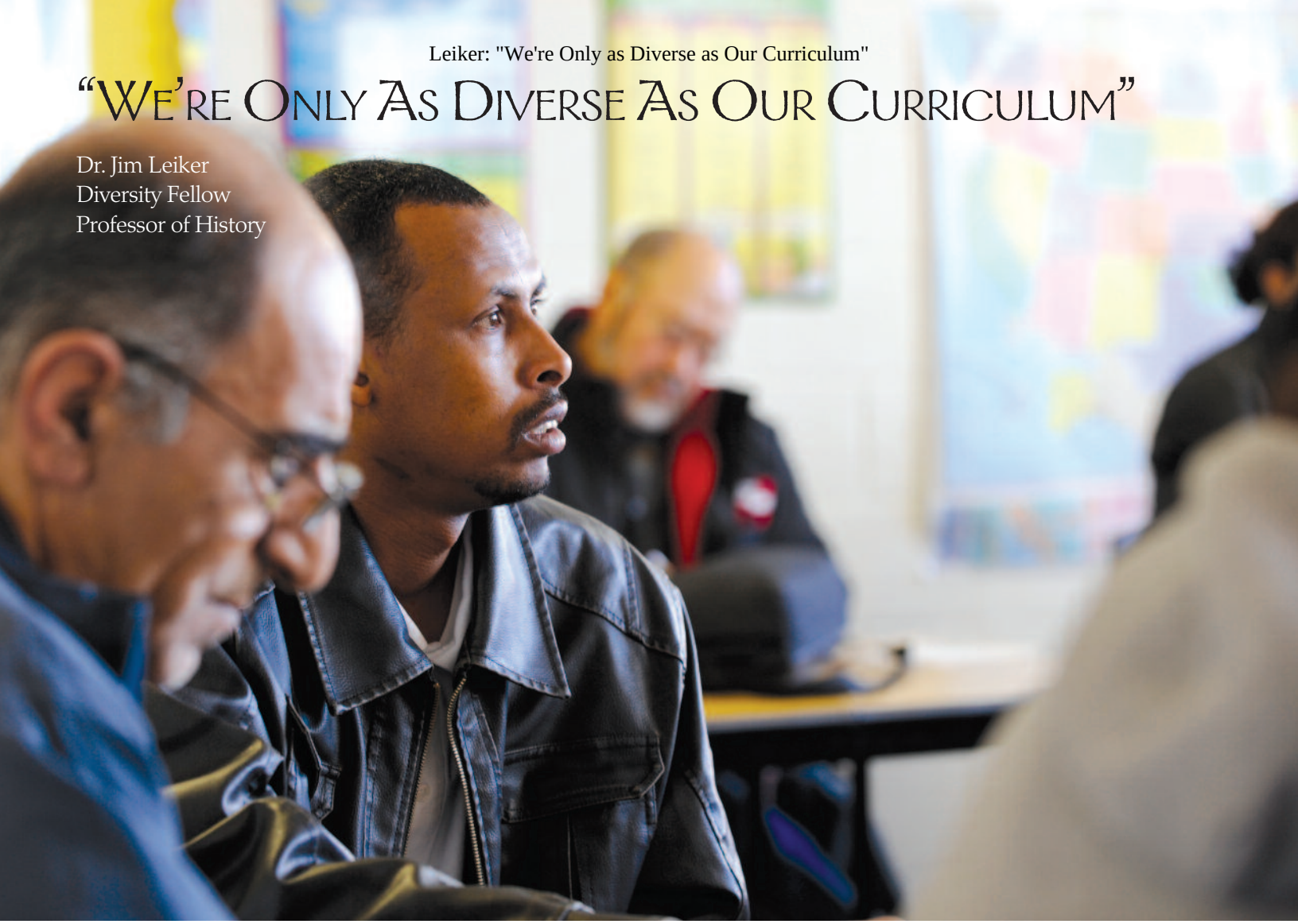
Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/mvoc

Recommended Citation
Leiker, Jim (2009) ""We're Only as Diverse as Our Curriculum"," *Many Voices - One Community*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 4.
Available at: http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/mvoc/vol1/iss4/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at ScholarSpace @ JCCC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Many Voices - One Community by an authorized administrator of ScholarSpace @ JCCC. For more information, please contact bbaile14@jccc.edu.

"We're Only As Diverse As Our Curriculum"

Dr. Jim Leiker
Diversity Fellow
Professor of History



Twenty years ago, a wise professor told me that any college or university is only as good as its course offerings. Though his wisdom has not dimmed over time, I would amend his statement to say that diversity in any educational institution is only as good as its curriculum. A quick glimpse at JCCC's online catalog shows an array of courses and programs as diverse as the thousands of students who come here, some seeking specialized training for imminent entry into the workforce, others beginning a process that will continue through a bachelor's degree and graduate school. Whatever their goals, students must learn to function in a world that grows ever more complex. No better opportunity for learning to manuever through that complexity exists than in the most important room on campus: the classroom.

Studying foreign languages seems the most basic way to get past stereotypes and overcome the island mentality that confines so many Americans to their own culture. French, German, Spanish, Latin – the European tongues – remain a staple at JCCC. But in recognition of the demographic changes sweeping the globe, the last few years have seen the addition of Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew, and others. If it's true that capitalism knows no national boundaries, then it knows no national language either. Corporations today expect their executives to function well in Calcutta, Dubai, Cairo, and Tokyo. In such an environment, mastering or even expressing oneself in an elementary way in another language is an enormous asset. It also serves someone well right here in Overland Park. How many of our librarians, teachers, social workers, and nurses originate from foreign countries?

The sociology course *Chinese Society: Past and Present* offers another example. Students discover the rapid evolution that China has made from a peasant society to a model of socialism to its current position as an economic superpower. The United States has maintained a strained relationship with China, skeptical of its human rights and environmental record but dependent on its supply of consumer items and debt financing. The course *Introduction to History: Japan* draws our attention to China's neighbor, a society that industrialized even faster yet retains a curious mix of the

traditional and hyper-modern. Often when casting our gaze to rising Asia, we forget the societies that lay closer to home. Anthropology's *People and Cultures of Mesoamerica* uses archaeological and ethnographic methods to examine the variety and continuity of traditions from Mexico to Costa Rica. Of course, one need not leave the U.S. to study diversity. African American Studies and Native Americans also offer in-depth understandings of the historical and contemporary forces that have shaped the food, customs, politics, and identities of various peoples of North America.

Assume, however, that our students will never travel, never work with anyone who does not speak English, never associate (in a meaningful way anyhow) with someone who does not look like them. They are still surrounded by difference. The psychology course *Human Sexuality* reminds us that people love, form relationships, and express themselves sexually in a variety of ways that challenge anyone's conception of normal. Sociology's *Marriage and Family* similarly examines the diversity of the most foundational of human associations. Questions about "when and with whom is sex appropriate?" or "who should be allowed to marry?" are some of the most divisive yet personal issues of our day. As with other debates, a challenging curriculum taught by professionals in the field is not designed to change students' values but to give them intellectual tools for confronting difference.

Too often we forget that cultures need not originate from language, race, country, ethnic group, or sexual orientation. *Introduction to the Deaf Community* explores Deaf Culture by comparing values and norms between Deaf and non-Deaf people. Students examine terms like "disability" and "hard of hearing," as well as philosophies about manual communication versus oral methods, to develop a better awareness of the many issues that affect this community. Those issues hold long-term implications not only for parents and family members but for politicians, administrators and media.

Some say that college classrooms are not the place for such material. After all, parents of a Deaf child can educate themselves about these things; travelers can always buy books on tape to learn a language; professionals who practice a little sensitivity and common sense will perform just fine in a diverse world. Right. And a smart person with Internet access and a stack of law books can be his own lawyer, or a person with medical books her own doctor. In theory, that is all possible. But in reality, the professions of law and medicine insist on the discipline and skills that come with formal education. Cultural diversity should be no less rigorous. It is time to stop treating diversity as just something nice people believe and treat it the way educators should: as a body of knowledge acquired through intense study that informs our lives and interactions with others. At the end of the day, we are only as diverse as what we teach.