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Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Aren't the Issues: They Are the Answers

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Johnson County Community College’s Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion has been on a very exciting, exhilarating journey this past year and a half. Several changes have been made. Dr. Kami Day, one of the original Diversity Fellows, led most of our social justice issue and cultural competency campaigns and was a tireless worker in helping to establish the ODEI. She has moved on to the next phase of her life in Oklahoma. Another original Fellow and committed worker, Dr. Shaun Harris, is on sabbatical this fall. Replacing them are Spanish professor Kerri Stephenson and Miguel Morales, a former student now working in the Billington Library. We welcome both of them to the ODEI and are looking forward to working with and learning from them. Also, we are pleased to announce that our Multicultural Center in 238 GEB is now open. Please come by any time to visit and share ideas with us.

The ODEI’s journey actually started many years ago with the vision of the college’s Diversity Committee to create a more diverse, equitable and inclusive community. We have worked very hard to frame a solid foundation for this work; to form expansive, yet functional, objectives and goals; and to facilitate the committee’s long-held, solid dreams for a better college, an enriched community, and a positive, productive learning environment in which our students can become fully engaged.

Our job has not been an especially easy one. Some people looked at our work as an unnecessary attempt to fix something that was not broken. After all, JCCC has always been firmly ensconced as one of the top community colleges in the nation. Others thought that we just needed to tell everybody to be polite and respect each other. Isn’t that why we brought Clifton Taulbert to campus a couple of times – to teach us the 8 Habits of the Heart? There was even a contingent of folk who feared that we would make conditions worse by muddying our pristine pool. We reflect our community, they said, and our institution should look like our taxpayers. We have been scolded, cajoled and even threatened. It has not been particularly easy to keep in mind that these criticisms were not personal. “It’s not about me” at times became our mantra. We have had to remind ourselves that some people fear change, so it is the work and the office that are the targets, not us as real people. Transformations, like revolutions, never come easy. Helping people to understand that a change is needed is incredibly difficult, especially at an institution like JCCC, which is wonderful in so many ways. We just need to remember that there is no such thing as a steady state: you either go up or you go down and we have no intention of losing ground.

But those times and those people are small in number, if not in decibels, in comparison to all
the support and enthusiasm and collaboration that we have received from all across campus and through our community. Not a day has passed without our hearing what a smart decision it was for this school to establish this office. We hear and welcome those comments about the amazing transformations now apparent in our campus culture. People tell us how welcome they now feel and how much they appreciate engaging with this institution in so many ways. Our hearts are happy, we smile often, and we laugh a lot.

Now, we know and confess that not all of those compliments are owed completely to the ODEI. Student engagement is increasing because JCCC is offering more opportunities and venues for our students to be part of this institution. Learner Engagement is precisely that. Our counselors work closely with students, guiding them through the educational process; they don’t just sign them up for classes. People in all areas across campus have given some of our enrolling students a personal phone call to welcome them to campus and to remind them of steps necessary to complete enrollment. The Center for Student Involvement is a diamond in our crown. Students enjoy having a place to meet and work together. Our Multicultural Center offers comparable spaces and activities for our students, staff and faculty. This is a very short and certainly not inclusive list of the people and places on campus that help to make this a wonderful place in which to study and to work. From the Performing Arts Series to the Food Court to the Gym, Burlington Northern, ATB, Science building, Billington Library, Regnier Center and all places in between and outside our immediate campus, JCCC is very fortunate to have so many people ready, willing, able and eager to help our students learn. This is what makes inclusion a reality and not just a buzzword.

Let me tell you a story that I hope demonstrates the incredible effect that reaching out to one student has on the world. We have all heard the wonderful adage, “Each One Teach One;” well, I think we can easily adapt this to say, “Each One Reach One.” The story: A dejected young man was walking alone, down the hallway of the college, head down, hands in his pockets, looking extremely forlorn. Ever since he was a young boy, he had harbored and nurtured a vision for his future. But that day he watched all his dreams of becoming a doctor disappear before his very eyes. His dreams began to wobble away from him because he had not passed his chemistry class. But they grew wings and took flight as he talked to his counselor, who told him he needed to think of another career. He was not going to make it to medical school. The young man was in the midst of the most conflicted time in his life: he didn’t want to change his dreams but someone who supposedly knew more than he about such things had told him that his goal was not obtainable.

A mentor who had taken an interest in the young man’s cohort – young, African-American males – saw the student in the hall and from his body language sensed something was desperately wrong. He startled the young man with a touch on his shoulder. Sensing his mentor’s real interest in him as a person and as a student, the young man confessed his devastation at losing his dreams. His mentor told him to
shift emotional and intellectual gears, reach out and recap-
ture that dream because if the young man wanted it hard
enough he could make it happen. But it would take more
than just wanting it; achieving the dream would take hard
work and a strong commitment. The mentor suggested the
student enroll in another chemistry class with a different
teacher. Maybe the professor’s teaching style would be
more conducive to the student’s learning style. The young
man followed his mentor’s advice, studied hard and passed
the chemistry course. In fact, he graduated high in his class.
He then went on to successfully complete medical school.

Because that mentor reached out and touched that student,
people in Belzoni and Chula, Mississippi, now have health
care. Because that mentor did not turn his back and rush off
to the many hundreds of other issues he had to attend, there
is a National Academy for Math and Science focusing on
middle-school students that was started by that once de-
jected student. Because that mentor reached out, a student
was able to realize his dream and more. The ripple effect of
that one touch is evident in the phenomenal numbers of
people that have benefitted by it. The student is Dr. Ronald
Vincent Meyers; the mentor is our own counselor, Dr.
Robert K. Murphy. Dr. Meyers’ goal now is to reach out and
help develop “A hundred Ron Meyers:” A hundred young
people with a dream. With the help of mentors like Dr.
Robert Murphy, he will.

That is what inclusion is about. We have to ignore the nay-
sayers and focus on the positive. We have to reach out to
truly engage our students to assure their success. Sure, we
know that teachers stay in contact with their students via e-
mail. That is very important, but it doesn’t replace the ben-
et of a face-to-face exchange or the “accidental” encounter
that might change someone’s life. The value of each person
in our on- and off-campus community is multiplied many
times over when we consider the ripple effect of a simple
reach. Our smiles at students in the hallways say, “Welcome
to JCCC. You, your life and your goals are important to us.”
The time we take to give directions or answer a question
connects students with our campus and helps them to make
it to their classes. The reassurance we give to every person
who steps on this campus that they are valuable, they are
welcome, and we genuinely are pleased that they chose
JCCC for their college experience engages them in our com-

munity and geometrically escalates their chances for a suc-
cessful educational experience. It creates a ripple effect of
success.

In this issue, we are spotlighting the work of some JCCC
students who have been fully engaged with our commu-
nity. Ignacio Carvajal graduated in May and is now attend-
ing the University of Kansas on a Jack Kent Cooke
scholarship, the first JCCC recipient of this prestigious
award. Smart, free-spirited Mackenzie Smith also gradu-
at ed in May, the recipient of a prestigious award, a
Carnegie-Mellon scholarship; she will continue her studies
in Arabic and creative writing. John Miller, Carlos Duarte
and Adam Lenk, all current students, are also featured.

As we continue to develop the Office of Diversity, Equity
and Inclusion and our Multicultural Center, our goal is to
engage more students, faculty and staff with this institution.
Feel free to be part of this campus and community-wide ef-
fort to enhance student success by reaching out and engag-
ing our students in a positive, productive learning
experience at JCCC.