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Many VOICES – One Community

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Journal of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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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 recapture 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 healthcare. 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-dejected 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 naysayers 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 benefit 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 community and geometrically escalates their chances for a successful 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 community. Ignacio Carvajal graduated in May and is now attending the University of Kansas on a Jack Kent Cooke scholarship, the first JCCC recipient of this prestigious award. Smart, free-spirited Mackenzie Smith also graduated 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 effort to enhance student success by reaching out and engaging our students in a positive, productive learning experience at JCCC.
THE LILAC FIELD

If we experience an act of justice
will it declare that we do not live in a
world replete with disparity?
I saw the field of lilacs.

It was here (in 1954)
on the corner of First and Capitol
where I first saw the initial lilac
in the courthouse bloom.

Lilacs,
you are the radiance during
the over-cast day. You are the tribe of activists
proclaiming, these actions are not taboo.

Close-bosom friend of the sun,
in you I find myself afloat
when I drop the anchor of my boat
only to realize that things are not yet done.

At the line of poplars, I see
Grandfather, with beard white as snow
and walking-stick, singing his refrain
to a proponent of equality: To you I give my sprig.

With the opulence of lilac, a stupor
overtook me like I had been adrift at sea
of poppies. Within my brow the questions came:
Are humans born with natural right?
-Or
Should it be equity or diversity
that helps decide constitutional issues?
But for now, to you
I give my sprig of lilac.
What I Learned from My Year as Program Director for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

by Danny Alexander, professor of English, Diversity Fellow

I won’t lie. I learned some negative truths. I learned that three-fourths of our programming events could be focused on diversity within the white, straight population, and many people on campus would still view our office as being overly focused on ethnicity and sexuality. I also learned that people thought we were spending great amounts of money (we weren’t) simply because of the amount of activity we took part in, very often promoting other groups, and again three-fourths of the time with donated labor. I learned way too many people do not realize what serious problems our campus has in terms of respect for the needs of diverse communities on the campus and in the community.

But the most important thing I’ve learned is that those numbers don’t represent a significant majority. In general, I’ve found that, in my sometimes feeble attempts to lend support in our many areas of interest, I have met a great many more people eager and willing to help. I won’t offer a comprehensive list here for fear of leaving someone out, but I’ve been very grateful for the tireless efforts to help address our diversity needs coming from part-time and full-time folks in a range of areas, including Staff Development, Counseling, Admissions, Dining Services, Housekeeping, Stagecraft, Computing and Media Services.

And, of course, there have been the students. We have been so lucky to have students drop by our office simply to offer words of encouragement, but some have helped us in chauffeuring guests to and from hotels and the airport, while others have helped us in editing our materials and planning and facilitating our events. With events such as Earth Day and Multicultural Night, I’ve had the pleasure of sitting in the passenger seat while our students took us where they knew we needed to go.

And almost half of our events were planned and run by faculty, both full and part time, who took the initiative to give presentations, facilitate discussions and/or serve on panels. We have an incredible amount of talent on this campus, and with a couple of exceptions, I think the very best things I did this year involved helping to showcase that talent. Other people have facilitated work like this long before I came along, but with my mission, it only underscored the diversity (as Dr. Leiker puts it elsewhere in this journal) that lives next door.

Our biggest challenge, in many ways, was to avoid competing with ourselves as an institution. For that reason, at the end of the first year, we had a meeting with almost all of the...
various programmers who host diversity events on this campus – everyone from the Campus Activities Board to International Education to Arts Education and Staff Development – and we talked about how we might strategically plan our calendars so that we are not in conflict with one another.

So far, our planning for 2009-2010 has been based on a SharePoint calendar that attempts to bring together all diversity programming on campus, and our mission will be to cross-promote all such efforts whenever possible.

Though I will no longer be in this position as program director, as an ODEI Fellow I will continue to advocate my vision that we work strategically to remove the fetters to diversity on this campus. Key to that effort is that we work in a collaborative endeavor with every corner of the campus, the Johnson County community, and the greater metropolitan area to raise awareness about our varied struggles to address the needs that bind our diverse communities together.

One of the highlights of my spring semester was a speech I initially dreaded, a talk I gave to the Leawood Chamber of Commerce. My fears turned out to be groundless. In a time of economic upheaval, the chamber recognized that change was inevitable and that embracing the growing diversity of the Johnson County population was crucial to much more than our spiritual well-being – it was key to our community’s ongoing viability. They were hungry for me to share our experiences at JCCC. I look forward to the day when that hunger is more pervasive right here in our own campus community. After all, I learned nothing more clearly this year than how hobbled I am by what I don’t know. I suspect I’m not alone.
Ever since JCCC opened its doors, there have, of course, been many firsts … the first student who enrolled, the first Teacher Exchange Program, and many other wonderful new beginnings that make us who we are. Under the leadership and untiring efforts of Carolyn Kadel in the International Education Office, there was another first last fall at JCCC. The first group of five Egyptian Fulbright professionals sponsored by The Community Colleges for International Development (CCID) and the State Department arrived at JCCC to study in the Hospitality program. Mostafa el Rawi, Ahmed Mokhtar, Mohammad Awad, Karim Kamh, and Ashraf Abdelwly are the first group of working professionals from a Muslim country to go through such a program.

I thought it would be interesting to see their viewpoints now that they have been here for nearly a year. Also, I was once in their shoes and wanted to examine how my experiences coming from Pakistan many moons ago were different from theirs. Of course, in my case, I came in as a naïve young woman student, whereas these men had been working in the hospitality industry for several years. Nonetheless, I thought it would be interesting to have a candid talk with them.

**SH: Could you tell me a little bit about how the five of you were selected for this program?**

Ahmed said that there was an initial meeting arranged by Fulbright Egypt in different Egyptian cities, which was attended by large groups of professionals. At these meetings applications for this program were handed out, and they were also available online. Ashraf added that about 3,000 people applied, out of which 500 were called for an interview, and then finally 200 were selected to study in the US. Those who were fortunate enough to be selected were selected primarily due to their work experience, the degrees they had obtained from different technical and career programs, as well as, in my case and Ahmed’s, on the bachelor’s degrees we had in our field of study.

**SH: What preparations did you go through in Egypt to get ready for your study in the U.S.?**

The students indicated that they had been offered a seven-month training program in English as part of their preparation, but not everyone had to attend the entire program. Based on their prior familiarity with the English language, the students could take the TOEFL test early if they so opted. Ashraf indicated that the students were also given a five-day orientation at the Marriott Hotel in Cairo, covering such topics as the educational system, health care and visa regulations, society and culture in the U.S., and other logistical issues while studying in the U.S. Once they arrived in the U.S., they were offered another three-day orientation in Washington D.C., along with students from Brazil, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia—countries that are part of this joint program between CCID and the State Department.

**SH: What was the greatest surprise after coming to the U.S.?**

Mostafa was the first to answer this question and indicated that the people were the biggest surprise. He did not expect that people would be as friendly and interested in his culture as they have been. Ashraf, on the other hand, felt that the
biggest surprise for him was that the U.S. media talks a great deal about democracy and respect for diversity, but after coming here he did not find this to be the case. Mohammad was surprised by the infrastructure and the common use of technology that is taken for granted by many in the U.S. But I think that Ahmed’s answer was the most telling. He indicated that youth in Egypt think of the U.S. as a dreamland, but one really has to struggle hard here to achieve success. The other surprise for him was the weather. As they say in Kansas, if you do not like the weather wait and it will change. Ahmed said at times he has experienced all four seasons in one day.

**SH: What did you expect the U.S. to be like, and especially Kansas?**

It seemed like I had touched a bit of a raw nerve with this question, since I got some very candid responses to this question. Ahmed did not want to come to the U.S. once he found out he was Kansas-bound, as he had heard about many interesting cities in the U.S. and wondered why he was being sent to the Midwest. Most of the students were expecting that they would be sent to touristy cities in the U.S., since they are all working in the hospitality industry. To them it was odd that their Egyptian colleagues in the IT area were being sent to Hawaii, and they, on the other hand, were being sent to Kansas. However, all of them indicated to me that the friendliness of the people, their instructors, and generally their program of study has more than made up for their initial disappointment.

**SH: How do you compare life in the U.S. with life in Egypt?**

Ashraf indicated to me that life in Egypt is far more social than here, but it is certainly more systematic, communication is used to build relationships rather than for primarily informational purposes as it is in the U.S., and Mohammad seemed to agree with him. They both felt that it was easier to get very real and honest in Egypt compared to the U.S. where people liked to stick to small talk. Mohammad feels that people in the U.S. generally focus on details in everything, whereas most Egyptians talk about the big picture. In part for these same reasons, Ahmed feels that it is harder to make friends in the U.S. than it is in Egypt, but it is also possibly because everyone stays so busy and stretched in different directions.

**SH: What has generally been your impression regarding studies in the U.S. as compared to Egypt?**

This question also evoked some very interesting responses. These professionals collectively felt that the studies in general are much easier in the U.S. than what they expected. They feel that there is also a big difference in the way instructors and students interact in the U.S. as compared to Egypt. In general there is a very lax attitude on the part of the students towards their professors—the nonverbal communication would be considered rude in Egypt, but not here. Another interesting point that these gentlemen raised was that the courses that they have taken thus far have not really addressed global issues in the classroom. Since all of them are working professionals in their industry, they were expecting an international perspective not only in their coursework but also by way of discussions.

**SH: When you talk about Egypt with your American colleagues, what is the general impression about Islam or a Muslim country?**
I was particularly interested in their response to this question given the media attention on Islam and Muslim countries. Most of them feel that their American colleagues generally do not have much idea about Islam, but once a conversation is initiated, many Americans are interested in knowing more about it. Ashraf and Ahmed have been very active in making presentations to different schools, and Ashraf, in particular, has made at least eight different presentations on Egypt and the Islamic faith. Ahmed found out quickly that Egypt is stereotyped in the minds of many Americans as the Pyramids, camels and deserts. But the reality, according to him, is that Egypt is very cosmopolitan and most people are working professionals. There are also many historical sites besides the Pyramids and Sphinx of Giza. Egypt also offers religious tours for people of diverse faiths. Ashraf indicated that many Egyptians are aware of other faiths, but surprisingly, even though the U.S. society is quite open, people over here are still unaware of the basics of Islam, as well as other international cultures and societies.

**SH: Tell me something about the mentor families that you all have been assigned and your experiences with them.**

Mostafa was the most vocal on this particular issue, since he has had the best experience with his host family. Rick and Elaine had been extremely kind and generous in many ways, especially by exposing Mostafa to the U.S. film industry. Ashraf expressed some concerns that in order for the mentor families and the visitors to have a mutually satisfying experience, there should be some orientation provided to the mentor families as well.

**SH: Have you had a chance to travel within the U.S.?**

Most of these men have travelled extensively in the U.S., visiting different cities. All of them marvel at the differences from one state to another. In certain cities, they noticed, one does not even feel that one is in the States. Some cities are more cosmopolitan than others, with good public transportation available, and, surprisingly, there are cities where they were hard pressed to find people who spoke English.

**SH: There is a new group of Egyptian students coming this fall. What advice would you give them now that you have been here for almost a year?**

Mostafa felt that, above all else, the incoming students should be flexible and adaptable. He feels being flexible will make them feel more at home and also help them make friends faster. Others told me they would tell the new students to travel as much as possible within the U.S. to experience the true diversity of the U.S. Ashraf, on the other hand, feels it is very important that the incoming students should have a game plan of what they want to achieve or experience while here in the U.S. Once they have a plan in place, he feels that the students will not just have studies as their main goal, but they will be also able to experience the richness of America.

As I was finishing up the interview, these men wanted me to be sure to add that their stay at JCCC would not have been the same without the kindness and generosity of Carolyn Kadel, and her staff, Janette and Barbara. Ahmed said it best, "Carolyn has been a mother to all of us in the U.S."
The Visions of the World program is the creation of Dr. Carmaletta Williams in the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI). Dr. Williams realized that the International Education department and the Intercultural and Immigrant Student Services Center do an excellent job of working with our international students and making them feel a part of this culture, but at the prompting of some of our Ethiopian students and employees, who wanted to share insight into their culture, faiths, language and food with the community at Johnson County Community College, she developed the Visions of the World program. As I am very connected with the Ethiopian community (my wife is Ethiopian), I was designated to spearhead this program. But the “vision” went further than this one program. Dr. Williams’ goal for Visions of the World is to uncover those pockets of communities that go largely unrecognized and allow them to share the rich heritage they bring to the United States with JCCC.

The Ethiopian community is one of the largest immigrant communities in Johnson County. The ODEI wanted to capture the essence of the Ethiopian community and share it with our JCCC community. Ethiopians have made a significant commitment by sending their children to JCCC first and then on to four-year institutions. Ethiopian students are the third-largest student population on campus. Many of them graduate from here, then transfer to the University of Kansas and the University of Missouri-Kansas City. These students bring strong mathematics and science educational backgrounds from their formal schooling in Ethiopia. Many of these students focus on completing degrees in nursing, bio-engineering, medicine, pharmacy and other health care professions.

Common to most of these families are three goals: a strong family, effective education and a devout church association. First-generation immigrant Ethiopian families face many hurdles and have significant needs. Many parents and young adults are looking for opportunities to support their families and to assimilate into American culture as they search for job opportunities, educational funding, health care and child care.

With these objectives in mind, a committee with Ethiopian students, community members and the ODEI created the Visions of the World: Ethiopian Connection Day. The committee felt the need to address the issues facing the Ethiopian community by providing workshops that focused on health care, education and job resources. The committee members worked for months to bring together more than 150 Ethiopians to the morning employment resource workshops, which were facilitated by Workforce Partnership and United Parcel Services; workshops on building a business and entering professional schools and a workshop on community involvement. A children’s center was created which brought together young children of all ethnic backgrounds to learn about Ethiopian culture. Another 350 community members and students attended the “Ethiopian Cultural Night” a dinner, music and fashion show event.

Our goals were met. We provided a powerful forum for our Ethiopian community to come together, to share with our larger community their lives and cultures, and for our Ethiopian students to feel a real part of Johnson County Community College. This year we will showcase another part of the world and let other people share their lives, their culture and their communities with JCCC.
Mexico City

Maybe Penelope awaits
While the sky fills with dust
As the morning breathes

But I’m far away
And the noises seem
Like a witness
Of the innocence

Tonight I see thieves
    Running
Their hands a mystery

And I call for her
Woman with a thousand souls
And yet
The loneliness is strong

A cascade of culture
With plenty of love

But the steps are drawn
When she packs her roads
And I’m left to feel
Am the missing stone

Of All But War

1.
run as you did before
cry like you have never done

be the picture that collapses
the verbs that invite

rest between your beauty
between your calamity
and something more
2.
(look at me
By these lines I’m formed
As the sound carries an integration of remorse)

Signal your love with wind
So I can be there

Be the truth of mornings
That have gone to past

But never believe yourself
A butterfly

Carlos Duarte, Student
“Poem 1”
there are times when
land buys into its own
absorption
when people land their
feet as if they had
a notion

but life is but an ocean
of uncertainty –
a siren blasting
through its innocence

as memory divides,
as weather changes
through time

we are the final
and the eternal
the blank promise
of things past.
Making my way through the crowded market, I am overwhelmed by the mesmerizing sights, demanding sounds and intoxicating aroma of life in a North African city. As I stumble through the narrow, muddy streets of the old Fez Medina, I see severed camel heads dangling above vendors’ stands and customers bartering for fresh meats from their local butcher. Throngs of people move in waves through the city’s core. Carts rumble past, Arabic pop music reverberates loudly through the city walls, and a man next to me is riding a donkey while chatting on his mobile phone. Pushing my way past piles of fruits and vegetables, I smell spices and fresh mint leaves mixed with pungent body odor. I have come to learn that Morocco is a fascinating mix of traditional and modern, where the lines of North African, Middle Eastern and Western cultures begin to blur and lose shape as they take on a new, distinctly Moroccan meaning.

I spent six months of last year living in Morocco and studying Arabic at Al Akhawayn University. More than simply changing my perspective on life in the Middle East, living abroad sharpened the lens through which I view the United States. From time to time, I stumbled upon references to American culture as I traveled around Morocco, and I was often asked questions about the United States. The subtle influence of American pop culture on Morocco first struck me while riding in a taxi cab through the tiny mountain town of Chefchaouen. Mariah Carey’s high voice popped and fizzled through the taxi’s aging stereo system, and the driver sang along to every lyric as we zipped through the city’s maze of streets.

When the song concluded, the driver, who introduced himself as Hassan, gave a satisfied sigh and said in Arabic, “I love Mariah Carey.” We spent the remainder of the journey discussing American pop culture. Hassan asked me to share my thoughts on movies, music and finally the United States’ role in world politics. Driving through the streets with reckless abandon, Hassan listened thoughtfully as I stammered my responses in Arabic and clutched my seat in fear of Hassan’s driving. This interaction asked me to carefully consider the influence of American culture abroad and my role as an American when I travel. Prior to my exchange with Hassan, I would have been reluctant to use American music as a conversation starter, but I have since discovered that taxi drivers in many countries have a penchant for Mariah Carey.

My time abroad developed my knowledge of the Middle East and North Africa and fueled my desire to learn about the world around me. Although the days since I left Morocco are becoming numerous, Morocco remains vividly in my mind and memory. As I cut and paste images from Morocco into my brain, they have become my own mental collage of people, experiences and an onslaught of sensory overload. While living in Morocco, I gained intellectual knowledge, but more importantly I saw the world from a new angle and experienced a perspective on life very different from my own.
When I was 12, I had a good friend named Max. My parents had recently allowed me to have a computer in my room, so of course, he and I would instant-message each other all day when we weren’t at school. One day, he started pestering me to listen to a song by a Japanese artist called Gackt. I was determined not to listen to the song for two reasons: the first being the artist’s name sounded like a sound a cat would make when it’s trying to get rid of a hairball; the second being the name of the song was “Emu –For My Dear~” (Romanized), and I had no intention of listening to a song about emus. When I finally caved and listened to the song, I decided to listen to it again and again. I asked to borrow Gackt’s CD, and for a week afterwards, I literally did not leave my computer while that CD was playing. I had only the vaguest idea of what Gackt was singing about, but I wanted desperately to find out.

After Gackt, whose music could be described as anywhere between rock, jazz and classical, I wanted something different, harsher sounding. Dir En Grey was the next Japanese band I fell in love with, and since then there have been countless others. I stopped listening to American music entirely. My friends would ask me if I had heard some song by an American artist, and after a month or two of my saying “no” to every suggestion, they stopped asking. They thought I was in some phase of my life that I would grow out of and start listening to American music again, after I got frustrated with not understanding Japanese. My parents thought this too for a while.

Two years into my Japanese music obsession, my parents finally realized that this wasn’t something I was going to grow out of soon. They recommended that I speak to a friend of the family who is a member of the Japan-America Society, and he took me to one of their meetings. There I met people more than twice my age, the majority of whom spoke Japanese fluently. When I was introduced to them, they all spoke Japanese to me. At the time, all I knew how to say was “good afternoon,” so they reverted to speaking English. I disappointed them, and I was incredibly embarrassed.

My grandmother, in her attempt to get to know me better, took me to a Japanese steakhouse for dinner one night. She assumed that I could speak more Japanese than I could and volunteered that I speak to the Japanese waitress. Again, all I could say that would make any sense was “good evening” and, again, I was embarrassed. Later that night, my grandmother told my parents that I had done “very well” speaking Japanese to the waitress. It was a blatant lie, and I knew it. After that, I started trying to learn useful phrases that I could use in conversation, instead of drawing on Gackt’s lyrics, phrases like “You who I loved too much are on the other side of the wall, softly smiling.”

It wasn’t easy, and I didn’t make much progress for another two or three years. It was just a hobby after all, so I didn’t put much pressure on myself to really learn it. The only foreign language my school offered was Spanish, and I didn’t want my parents to have to pay for a tutor, so I was on my own. I would sing in Japanese in my car alone or at my computer when no one was home. I wanted to be a chef when I grew up, and that was about it.

Over the last year or so, a little idea has formed in the back of my head somewhere, that maybe I could be a translator for the U.S. government or some company like Sony or Toshiba that does business overseas. When I started college, I finally started taking formal Japanese language classes. That little idea in the back of my head has turned into a job possibility.

Once I started taking classes, everything about the language seemed to fall into place: the structure of the sentence, the differences in formal and informal speaking and, of course, the vocabulary. My classmates would ask me for help, asking if I knew which particle was used to contrast two items instead of link them. I would be able to tell them, but when they asked why it was so, all I would be able to say was “It sounds right. I knew this because listening to music and watching TV and movies in Japanese had given me a significant advantage over everyone else in the class, even some who had taken Japanese previously in high school.

I’m currently in my second semester of Japanese classes, and I still have that advantage. But it isn’t so much the listening to music in Japanese that has given me the advantage, but that I seem to have limitless motivation in that class, which is more than I can say for most of my other classes. Because I am always seeking to improve my Japanese, I integrate other areas of my life to benefit my learning. I work somewhere that has a one-hour photo lab where all the instructions on the machines are written in Japanese first, then English. I try to make it a point to eat at a local Japanese restaurant at least once a week and practice my Japanese with a waiter. Of course, when I watch TV and movies in Japanese, I listen specifically for the words and lessons I’m learning in my classes.

I don’t think I will be able to satisfy my hunger for the Japanese language until I’ve lived there for years and have become completely fluent. After that, well, let’s just say Cantonese has caught my ear as well.
First of all, I would like give thanks to the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for giving me the opportunity to write this paper. I’m glad to be around people who appreciate and promote diversity on this campus. As a first-generation college student, earning a college degree has always been a priority in my life. I want to prove to my family that I can make a difference in many individuals’ lives by becoming a successful nurse. I come from Sudan, which suffers from a shortage of nurses. This plays a major role in my reason for selecting nursing as a career.

The International Club was the first club I joined at Johnson County Community College because it offered a comfort zone for me. I felt like I could relate to other students who are not from this country. Later, I joined numerous other clubs to experience the benefits of extracurricular activities. One of the last organizations that I joined was the Student Senate. By being involved on campus, I gained valuable experiences that I am always going to carry with me.

One of my most memorable moments at JCCC was the Multicultural Night. It made me realize the value of all people and the worthy contributions individuals contribute to solidarity. Learning about others will help you learn about the world we live in and let you choose what is right for you. Everyone is the same race, the human race. We can celebrate each other without having to lose who we are inside.
This past April, while helping lead a tour of the Flint Hills for JCCC international students, hearing them contrast the tallgrass prairies with the manicured lawns of suburban Kansas City reminded me again of the surprising diversity within the sunflower state. I say “surprising” because for most hurried travelers on I-70 or I-35, Kansas can be a flat, boring place, occupied by flat, boring people, through which to cross on the way toward something more exciting. Yet a brief excursion off those highways, combined with some historical knowledge and a little imagination, will uncover real gems.

Take, for example, Southwest Kansas where over the past 30 years the meatpacking industry has created jobs for thousands of immigrants from Central America and Southeast Asia. Scores of Mexican, Vietnamese and Laotian restaurants fill the towns of Garden City, Liberal and Dodge City. Families of Mexican Mennonites, descendants of German-Russians who settled in Mexico more than a century ago and who today speak German and Spanish, fill the aisles at Walmart. That corporate giant, with row upon row of ethnic foods catering to multiple groups, is one of many institutions learning to adjust to the demographic changes. Anthropologists and ESL instructors in the K-12 districts and community colleges work in tandem with city administrators to ease the transition, both for newcomers and longtime locals who see their communities changing before their eyes.

Kansas has long prided itself on being “the free state,” a reputation gained during the struggle to prevent slavery’s westward expansion in the 1850s. Yet as Dr. Carmaletta Williams often says, “Free did not mean welcome.” The state government often tinkered with various ways to exclude African-Americans, even allowing school segregation in second-class cities, and racial violence was not unheard of. But African-Americans came anyway, founding dozens of rural settlements like Nicodemus, or forming communities parallel to whites in places like Wichita and Topeka. Descendants of those first black settlers in the state capitol launched the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, that helped spark the modern civil rights movement.

Outside of urban Wichita and Kansas City, the largest concentrations of blacks lay near the state’s federal military bases, Fort Leavenworth and Fort Riley. In 1975 writer Calvin Trillin, then a restaurant critic, described his great delight with Junction City’s Satellite Cafe, run by a retired black mess sergeant and serving black soldiers and their families. Unhappy with what he called the bland cuisine of most Kansas restaurants, Trillin was impressed with the cafe’s
“soul food specials” of pigs’ feet, black-eyed peas and cornbread. The full diversity of the place escaped him, however, until he entered the kitchen and discovered that these meals were not prepared by African-Americans at all but by a Japanese woman whom all the locals knew as “Judy-san.” After World War II, black and white servicemen returning from the Pacific theatre with Japanese wives were stationed at Fort Riley, earning the base a reputation as a safe spot for biracial families. Vietnamese and Thais joined this population in the 1970s, followed by Latinos from Central America a decade later. As of 2009, Junction City’s schools, churches, businesses and cultural celebrations often conduct their affairs in multiple languages.

At first glance, the story of Native Americans in Kansas seems the saddest of all, given their eviction and virtual extermination in the late 1800s. Yet census figures reveal some interesting trends. In 1940 the Census Bureau listed the number of Indians in Kansas as less than 1,200. That number doubled by 1950; doubled again by 1960; and in 1990 stood at more than 20,000. Next year’s estimate promises to be even higher. Less a sign of biological fertility, the numbers indicate a dramatic change in consciousness, as people who were once eager to hide native ancestry now proudly proclaim it. In so doing, they challenge scholars, government agencies and all who work with diversity to reconsider their usual classifications. What exactly is a Native American? Who are Latinos? What does it mean to be African-American?

We should especially ask that question of the most dominant group of all. Yes, both historically and at present, “whites” comprise about 90 percent of the state population. But who precisely is “white?” Eastern Europeans in Strawbery Hill; Italian miners and socialists in Southeast Kansas; Mennonites, Amish, Lutherans, Catholics from the entire German diaspora – with such an array of languages, churches, and lifestyles, to lump them all under one category opposes the goal of appreciating true diversity.

I believe the pundits who say we now live in a global community. As diversity facilitators, we have a responsibility to provide students an international education where they can live and work outside their usual comfort zones. But sometimes in directing their attention globally, we miss what advocates of sustainability say about living and working locally. Yes, diversity is on the other side of the world, but it is also here, within a day’s drive, within an hour lunch break, most especially in our classrooms and maybe even at our dining table. As with most important things, diversity lives right next door.
My mother called. “Diay, Jose,” and I can picture her driving her Toyota Corolla, on the way home from picking up my sister and groceries for dinner, “era para ver cómo estabas, porque ayer no supe nada de vos.” I did not call or see or hug her for a day, and she is concerned. In Spanish, I tell her that I’ll be taking the 7:10 back to Lawrence and that I’ll be home for dinner. After I hop off the K-10 Connector, I start my car and drive off. The hip-hop crew, The Blue Scholars, flowing out of the only working speaker, put it simply: “It’s gonna take more than just some rain to change this.”

I, like most, know change. Almost seven years ago, it took more than metaphorical rain for my father to decide that he would pursue an education in the United States. He brought his whole family with him. I was a 13-year-old child at the time. Now, I, like many, seek change. If not change, I at least seek a satisfactory understanding of the necessity for it, or the catalysts behind it.

My medium for this understanding, in the past couple years, has been higher education, specifically at Johnson County Community College. The college has a self-appointed duty to constantly adjust, re-evaluate and understand how to cater to thousands of students. I roam the hallways and see these adjustments take place.

Inevitably, people come from a certain place, a certain family, a certain culture; they fit inside a variety of bubbles. Often, though, we place them into rigid boxes: “black” boxes, “gay” boxes, “Catholic” boxes, “women” boxes, “men” boxes, “Muslim” boxes, “foreign” boxes, “American” boxes, “right” boxes, “wrong” boxes. We assume a totality, instead of a mere characteristic.

I live in what some may regard as two different worlds. My home is a haven for Spanish, for Costa Rican food, and for family. When I am not at home, I speak, read and write mostly in English. I am even an English tutor, and my behavior certainly changes as I go in and out of myriad bubbles.

I see the words that I choose to utter and the actions that I choose to carry out as a response to what surrounds and shapes me – as characteristics – but by no means as a direct representation of the totality of my being. We all navigate realities, bubbles, and they are vastly different. We must, though, cease to be scared of them; we must realize that they lack the rigidity of the boxes we continue to create.

Change does not come easily. However, in my four semesters at JCCC, I have come across people who are constantly devoted to the implementation of it.

The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion was instituted to become the catalyst of this change. From Latino Writers Collective readings to multicultural events, the office strives to infuse understanding about the individuals who populate the college’s bubbles. They seek to educate about a change that becomes more and more necessary. They are the sparkers, the shakers, the storm clouds rolling in.

I have experienced their efforts first hand. It was thanks to the ODEI that I joined the Latino Writers Collective after the office showcased its members at a reading. It was partly thanks to their support that JCCC’s “Multicultural Night” was a success last fall. It was largely due to people like them and their efforts that I will seize the next step in my education.

As a non-citizen, I am not eligible for any type of federal financial aid. This – and any boxes into which some might tend to place me – made no difference when I strode into Carmaletta Williams’ office to meet her. It made no difference when I was introduced to President Terry Calaway by two of my mentors, Drs. William Stockton and Robert Xidis. It made no difference when I introduced myself to Dr. Dennis Day. Thanks to their support and encouragement, I am the first JCCC student to be a recipient of the Jack Kent Cooke scholarship, which will fund my studies at the University of Kansas.

The way I see it, we all are scholars. My mother is a pious scholar of life. Preya, a JCCC cashier, is a scholar of making me feel welcome with just a smile when I come to buy a bus pass. I am simply an aspiring scholar of understanding the world that surrounds me and its people, the change that they continue to demand. The people at the ODEI are scholars of meeting the needs of other scholars: scholars who refuse to be placed into boxes.

As I steer my car around a corner in a town in the Midwest, on the way to dinner with my mother, weeks away from moving to Washington, D.C., for summer study, I see the way the bubbles float into each other. I see the way that they fuse. I pull into my parking spot, sit back and see drops on my windshield. Life keeps moving. And people keep trying to change to live it. The Blue Scholars start to die down on my stereo.

http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/mvoc/vol1/iss3/1
It is “gonna take more than just some rain to change this.” But in the halls of JCCC, and inside the heads of people who seek to understand, it is already pouring.

Our Armed Struggle

We are brothers in arms
but we use them to hug
like only real men know how to
like we are not afraid to admit it

We are brothers in arms
but our only war is
a war on ignorance, misconception
and if we carry bayonets on our shoulders
it is only to dig the graves in which to bury them

We are brothers in arms and
wave not the flags of idealists,
only our hands and words
beckoning the ears that are
willing to listen

And we are also the sisters
tired of nursing the wounds
of their husbands and fathers
who could not open their eyes
and chose to shoot instead of speaking
chose not to swallow their pride and
let it come out in the form of bullets

We are brothers in arms
and in our holsters are
only the tools of the builders:
hammers not for smashing bones
but for laying foundations
and letters to sink into our

concrete walls, hoping to remind us,
every morning at waking

That we are brothers in arms
brothers in tongues and eyes,
brothers in waiting, never
just sitting and waiting, but
bringing forth the days – that will come –
when we can stand and proclaim this
and watch our brothers and sisters embrace it
bring into their homes and at the tables say it:
These arms will not harm you
they will speak to you, let you
stand upon them and, if at all, they bring fire
it will be the one already burning
in the eyes of our sisters and brothers
waiting for the right hands to feed it.
We are brothers in arms.
We are here to feed the fire.