

Building IDEAL Student Engagement

By Carmen Phelps, Director of Student Engagement/IDEAL

When I came here to Temple in January of this year to serve in the role of Director of Student Engagement in the Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, Advocacy and Leadership (IDEAL), responsible for producing multicultural and social justice programs as well as for providing advocacy for the university's diverse student population, I left a position as a tenured Associate Professor teaching courses in Ethnic Literature, Women's and Gender Studies, Africana Studies, and Law and Social Thought – all courses oriented around social justice ideals. I had also been serving as Director of Graduate Studies in English, a scholar, and student advocate at various institutions before coming to Temple. As a professor, I was consistently hearing from my students how much they appreciated having meaningful and even oftentimes challenging but provocative discussions about issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc., and the ways in which aspects of power, privilege, and oppression informs our collective thinking about such issues. It was my accumulated experiences in as well as outside of the classroom that compelled me to seek a position wherein I believed I would have the capacity to impact the experiences of students campus-wide rather than only those whom were taking my courses. When I learned of this particular opportunity at Temple, I was excited by the prospect of doing so at an institution designated and perceived as the “diversity university,” and as such, I assumed that this, more than any other institution where I'd served as a professor, administrator, scholar, and student advocate would be far more progressive and advanced in terms of where it was in realizing inclusion, equity, and social justice ideals for the benefit of its campus community. However, the more conversations I had with students, and the more they shared with me about their experiences, observations, concerns, etc., the more I realized how much work needed to be done in these areas. The concepts for the series “Owl Talk Tuesdays” – a student-only discussion that takes place every third Tuesday of the month from 5-6pm, and which focuses on current or headlining events that inspire conversations about issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, dis/ability, and citizenship, for instance – was a program I conceived in collaboration with an advisory coalition of students with which I work, and for the purpose of building community across “difference” among students, which is an essential component to advancing diversity ideals and social justice for all identities and communities on campus. The student advisory coalition is composed of individuals representing various backgrounds and interests and whom are extremely dedicated to advancing diversity ideals on campus. The feedback we've been receiving from students in response to the Owl Talks has been incredibly positive. Not only have students suggested we host them more frequently, but they've also requested that there be more time dedicated to such discussions. I've also worked with the coalition to produce cultural heritage month programs, including programs in honor of Latino/a, LGBTQIA+, and Indigenous/First Nation Heritage Month. In addition, we've hosted programs focusing on the subject of “Microaggressions;” “Challenges Facing LGBTQIA+ Communities (Since the Same-Sex Marriage Ruling);” “Stories of Latino/a Experiences;” “Immigration Policies on Latino/a Communities;” Transgender Competency and Awareness;” “Voices of Justice: Members of Native Communities Speak at TU;” and a multicultural roundtable discussion focusing on “Religion, Identity, and Social justice.” I've also hosted town hall meetings for various affinity groups, including LGBTQIA+ identified students, students with disabilities, Jewish-identified, and Asian/Asian-Pacific Islander students. Additionally, there's an upcoming town hall for first generation college students after the Fall Break. All of the town halls are open forums for students to share their experiences and concerns with me as students identifying as members of these particular communities. Most of them take place in The Burrow – spaces dedicated to multicultural and social justice programming as well as community-building across “difference” in the Office of IDEAL. Last Spring, I also coordinated town halls for black, Latino/a, and women-identified communities, and several trans-identified students granted me the privilege of meeting with them one-on-one so that I could learn more about their particular needs and possible challenges on campus. All of the data I acquire from town halls as well as other information-gathering processes is being used for the purpose of generating a report about campus climate relative diversity ideals and the experiences of all students - particularly those representing historically underserved and/or underrepresented populations.

In order to fulfill the responsibilities of my position, upon arriving to campus, my first goal was to establish relationships with as many student leaders as possible and to engage the populations for whom they advocate - particularly members of underrepresented and/or underserved student groups, including students of color, LGBTQIA+ identities, socio/economically disadvantaged groups, women, students with disabilities, and those represented various faith-based communities. I knew that meeting all such students in order to gain a greater sense of their experiences on campus, their interests, concerns, etc., would be necessary in my goal to be an effective, student-centered, service and social-justice oriented advocate and program administrator with deep, demonstrated investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion ideals. As I learned more about their experiences on campus, it was clear to me that many of them were quite hesitant about sharing such information with me, and there were questions about my intentions to support them as an administrator represented the Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, Advocacy and Leadership (IDEAL) as well as Temple University in general. It took many of them a while to get comfortable sharing their narratives with me and trusting me with their personal stories. I think my willingness to share defining aspects of my own personal story with them, including the fact that I was born and raised in a single-parent home in Ferguson, MO, that I identify as a bisexual black woman, and am a first generation college student, who continues to confront discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion because of who I am and what I represent gives them a sense of my values and approach to my work on campus. Advocacy in the interest of social justice isn't simply what I do – it's who I am.

One of my future goals includes reaching out to faculty who might be interested in serving as part of an advisory group whose perspectives and feedback would be used to inform programs promoting diversity and social justice ideals (ensuring that all students have the necessary resources - including academic, social, and cultural support - to reach their maximum potential on campus, and that we're fostering an environment that speaks to this ideal), and which would be meant to contribute to overall student development. Such efforts would complement the learning process that takes place in their classes and enrich their development beyond such spaces. I'm hoping to get an encouraging response from faculty, and many of them have already contributed to our programs. Relationship-building



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with faculty, administrators, and students is a critical component to my work, as working to realize intersecting diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice ideals are themselves collective and inclusive processes, and I'm excited to continue this work in the Spring of 2016. ♦