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Q&A: Michael Jennings, Furman's Chief Diversity Officer

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Michael Jennings began serving as Furman's chief diversity officer in July. Prior to this position, Jennings was associate dean of the Consortium for Social Transformation at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He was also a tenured professor in the department of educational leadership and policy studies. Jennings earned his Ph.D. and M.A. in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and he received his B.A. in political science from Hampton University.

We're seeing more and more universities create leadership roles that help to address issues associated with diversity on college campuses. Why do you think there is such a need for this position at Furman and other universities?

MJ: Universities reflect society. Our society is becoming increasingly more diverse, and universities are doing the same. When populations change, tension rises and divisiveness happens. This creates the need for a leader who will address these issues, bring people together and offer solutions.

We've also seen that most college students have reported that they want to be a part of a college with a diverse student body. But that means more than they simply want a certain number of a certain kind of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, etc. It's about equity and equal opportunity. College students want equal opportunity to be their best selves at Furman.

Michael Jennings

Furman's Chief Diversity Officer

BY LINDSAY NIEDRINGHAUS '07



How do you go about achieving equal opportunity for all students?

MJ: It's a long process, but it starts with engaging a broad constituency of people. If I only speak with students of color, I only hear one thing. Certainly, their voices need to be heard, but I really need to speak with everyone—the faculty, the staff, a variety of students, as well as the community. I need to hear all viewpoints, understand where each is coming from and then try to bridge the gaps.

"Community" is a big word at Furman right now. Many efforts are underway to better engage the university with the community. Why such an effort, and how do you contribute to it?

MJ: A residential campus creates a different sort of situation. It's nice because everyone is on campus all the time, but it's also not nice that everyone is on campus all the time, because they can become disconnected from the local community.

With this position, I'm hoping to get involved in many local organizations, develop relationships and build trust. Only after that will we be able to work together to devise solutions. None of this work is transactional. It's going to take a while. I may have to speak with someone for six months before they're willing to trust me and trust the institution to follow through on our promises. I understand that, and I'm willing to put in the work.

So, you're saying this isn't an overnight fix?

MJ: Hardly. Furman has been around for more than 175 years. It's formed its own traditions, own directions. So, increasing diversity, developing more programs to encourage a more inclusive student body—that will take time as well. As it should ... it all comes from cultivating relationships, understanding context, getting a sense for what has worked, what hasn't.

Also, I want to note that I'm not trying to change the institution that is Furman. I have

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respect for its history, its culture, its heritage. I’m simply trying to help pivot the direction to be more forward-thinking.

How do you think your background as a professor and researcher will benefit you as you move into a role in administration?

MJ: At Furman, the faculty members are essential to the institution. Their teaching and their relationships with the students are top priorities. That’s not the case at every university. I came from a place that’s very research-oriented, where grants and publications are more important than teaching. There was a lot of red tape, a lot of processes, which has given me a certain skill-set that I think will translate well to serving in administration.

There’s a reason I didn’t try to take on a position like this earlier in my career. I saw value in becoming a full professor first. Only then would I be fully prepared to work with and lead faculty because I had been in their shoes.

Many at Furman are hoping you can offer suggestions for programs that would help increase diversity and provide more support for underrepresented constituents. However, others believe that creating programs for these students only further labels them as “different.” How do you reconcile these two viewpoints?

MJ: Well, let’s take African-American students, for example, as they’re one of the largest minority groups at Furman. I’ve spoken to some of these students, and they’ve voiced the wish to have a strong presence of the historic African-American Greek organizations on campus.

Some would say, “What’s the need for that? Why can’t all types of people be in the same fraternity or sorority?” And they can, of course, and many are at Furman. However, I believe that supporting the historically African-American Greek letter organizations that make up the National Pan-Hellenic Council is important because those organizations are steeped in a history that reflects their commitment to scholarship, community service and social justice in ways that have benefitted all communities for more than a century.

The key, really, is learning from each other, understanding that everyone needs their own support systems, and embracing differences. There’s not a simple answer for anything related to the issue of diversity, and it’s going to take many conversations, connections and discussions to figure out the best solutions for Furman. And I look forward to that. ●



NEXT

Reflection on Furman going forward

The transition of the Malone Career Center to the Malone Center for Career Engagement (MCCE) represents a major shift in professional preparation services for Furman students. In support of the goals of The Furman Advantage, we’re emphasizing customization of services, creating pathways that integrate academics and co-curricular activities, and connecting students with alumni and others who can offer career advice, support and potential internships. To make this successful, the center is building alliances across campus and beyond.

The Office of Academic Affairs is a key connecting point. We talked with department heads, deans and faculty about what effective “academic-career” partnerships might look like on campus. As The Furman Advantage initiatives were being developed, key areas of collaboration formed for the center. One such example involves the MCCE staff working with Beth Pontari, associate provost for engaged learning, and Michelle Horhota, associate dean for mentoring and advising, to support initiatives that facilitate students’ personal and professional preparation. These collaborations include working to increase students’ participation in engaged learning opportunities, internships, and undergraduate research, as well as expanding mentoring opportunities—key areas of overlap with the center’s new mission.

The MCCE has also worked with the Office of Alumni and

Parent Engagement to get students involved in The Loop, an initiative spearheaded and launched by that office in May. The Loop connects students and alumni through career spotlights, videos of graduates discussing their careers and professional journey. It also hosts real-time, online networking events with alumni through a program called Furman Connect. Alumni interested in joining The Loop and its associated informational and networking programs can learn more by visiting the Office of Alumni and Parent Engagement website at alumni.furman.edu.

The MCCE will continue to support The Furman Advantage by providing students with a portfolio of unparalleled professional development experiences that strategically connect them to their individualized futures. Two new connecting initiatives being designed include Career Treks—taking students to visit employers in targeted industries and locations—and bringing experts to campus for professional-in-residence programs. The objective of these initiatives is to connect students with those who can help them explore, set goals, make plans and ultimately deliver on the promise of a successful, satisfying career.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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