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By Rachael Branscomb
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Nicollette Mitchell is the Director of the Center for Learning, Education, and Research in the Sciences at Oberlin College. Growing up in New York City, Nicollette attended Fiorello H. Laguardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts before continuing on to Oberlin College where she majored in Africana Studies and Geology. After receiving her Master of Science from the University of Arizona, Mitchell returned to Oberlin as the Inclusive Excellence STEM Fellow before taking on the role of Director of CLEAR. We at The Synapse are excited to see the ways the CLEAR Center will grow and evolve under Nicollette's guidance!

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What did you do between graduating from Oberlin and coming back to work as the Director of CLEAR?

During college, I realized that I liked studying humans and history in general, which link geology and Africana studies because geology is history on the time scale of earth and Africana studies is history through the lens of the diaspora. After graduation, I didn't have a plan and ended up at home for a bit teaching math and reading to sixth and seventh graders through Kaplan Test Prep. I also worked at T.J. Maxx and studied for the GRE. I discovered that studying paleoclimatology in grad school would be a good fit for me because paleoclimatology is the study of climate change over time. Through my courses, I noticed that a lot of the impacts of climate change we were studying are going to disproportionately impact people of color; the tropics and cities, where all the black and brown folks are, are going to get hit more than other locations. But, even knowing that, there is not a lot of representation in geology or in the field of paleoclimatology, especially when it comes to the global discussion about what we're going to do.

When I was in grad school I became a lab manager and basically started running the research program in my lab. I started recruiting students from underserved populations to work with me and I began advocating for increased equity in the sciences. Geology is not the most diverse of the sciences. And the program I was attending liked to brag about being the top in the country. And I thought, if we're the top in the country, why am I the only black person? Why are there only two Latinx students in my cohort of 80? So, I ended up joining every diversity initiative on campus that I could. I managed to get folks from the Dean of Students Office, tenured faculty, and other grad students to co-design a course called Diversity in the Geosciences. And every week, all of the first and second-year grad students had to come together and talk about

things that were super uncomfortable. It was a learning experience.

How did you end up as the Director for CLEAR?

Oberlin got the HHMI grant (Howard Hughes Medical Institute grant) which had a fellowship position for someone who had graduated within the last five years. I had kept in contact with my research advisor in the Geology department who knew about the work I was doing in Arizona and let me know about the fellowship. So, I packed my life into a shipping crate and moved back to Oberlin. I spent the first three months figuring out what to do with my life, how to be a fellow, and shadowing Marcelo. Through the fellowship, I supervised OWLS and supported student organizations on campus that serve underserved populations like the Black Scientists Guild. I also went with students to conferences like the National Association of Black Geoscientists and the National Society of Black Physicists. Initially, I didn't apply for the position of Director of CLEAR. The job description said Oberlin preferred someone with a PhD and I had a Masters. I actually did my job talk on Imposter Syndrome because I didn't think of myself as someone who was qualified enough to be in this position, even though when you read the job description I had clearly been doing a lot of the things required. I had a gut feeling that I should stay around for longer, so I went in and submitted an application on the last day.

We've seen Imposter Syndrome around campus recently. What does it mean and how did it come about?

After I did the workshop on Imposter Syndrome for my job interview, I partnered with some of the people in the Center for Student Success and the Counseling Center to put on a workshop series for Imposter Syndrome. It's the 40th anniversary of the coinage of the term, which was actually coined here at Oberlin by two psychologists in the Counseling Center, who noticed female students coming in saying they weren't qualified when they were! So, keep an eye out, because you'll see more workshops and talks about Imposter Syndrome Spring Semester 2019!!

As the Director for CLEAR, where do you see the CLEAR Center going? What initiatives do you have planned for CLEAR?

I've been focused on listening to students who work for CLEAR and asking them what is working well for them, and how I can offer more support in the process. I was blessed because I had Yemko and Charles as coordinators and we focused a lot on building a sense of community among CLEAR staff, with hopes of then expanding that community and sense of belonging outside of CLEAR. OWLS now have Parliamentary Meetings; we've built in more regular support for the coordinators and made their job duties clearer, so students are aware that the coordinators exist as a support and resource.

I've also begun highlighting an objective observation protocol in some OWLS sessions; I observe the session and comment objectively on exactly what happened and identify what worked well and areas for growth. When I came in, there was a separation between the OWLS and Quantitative Skills Center – and there still is – but I've focused on building connections between the two. I'm working to make our OWLS and QS Center students more comfortable working as leaders in STEM; I think a lot of barriers to success in STEM have been broken down through their efforts.

CLEAR was originally founded through another HHMI grant as academic support for students, but it has become more expansive

than that. CLEAR is a connector for all things STEM. And because we work with professors across disciplines we've become the hub. We are trying to be intentional about creating a space for people who have been traditionally underserved in the sciences.

How do you hope that CLEAR will impact the community?

My hope is to raise people's awareness. I feel like a lot of people are not aware of the historical and social structures that have led to the current state of STEM. I would like people to be more aware and able to articulate that and to see their role in changing how STEM works. IF that were to happen in the next five years, I would be really happy. I'd like to be able to talk to faculty and staff in any department, not just in STEM, about what it's like to be a STEM student at Oberlin, what it takes to be successful, what support systems exist, and to build a sense that everyone who intends to be a STEM major, can.

What is CLEAR and what resources do you want students to be aware of?

I was trying to explain what CLEAR is to a faculty member and he said, "Nicollette and CLEAR make STEM at Oberlin work for more people." I hope to broaden CLEAR beyond just STEM, but that's a very lofty goal.

Resources for students? I'd hope that students would see each other as resources. All CLEAR programs are peer mentorship-based. Because no one knows better what it's like to be a student and how to succeed at Oberlin than someone who's done it. And whether that's through OWLS, QS, or reaching out to folks in their classes to form study groups, I hope that people see the ways CLEAR will grow and evolve.● ● ●

What is the C.L.E.A.R. Center?

The Center for Learning Education And Research in the sciences (C.L.E.A.R.) aims to strengthen quantitative and formal reasoning skills by providing peer support for basics like math and graphs, and advanced skills, such as modeling, which are common in different disciplines. We are the home of the Oberlin Workshop and Learning Sessions (OWLS), and Quantitative Skills (QS) Center. Through peer support, CLEAR fosters intentional inclusive learning environments and instills in students the importance of the "whats" and the "hows" of learning.