

What Happens When DEI and a Rural Community College Collide

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When one talks of diversity, images of large, multicultural cities come to mind, not small-town, rural America. And yet, Butler County Community College (BC3) which is located in the very definition of rural America, has changed this mindset over the last couple of years through the library's programs on topics related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). BC3 has brought the world to its corner of America and this initiative has been greeted with both positive feedback and support. The successful implementation of DEI programs at BC3's campus is a testament that the topic of DEI should not be regarded as polemical but rather, one that can foster a willingness to step outside of one's comfort learning zone.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change." Is it possible for that same dictum to be applied to a community college in a predominantly rural area comprising mainly white students, faculty and staff when it comes to introducing the sometimes-polemical topic of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) to this very same campus? The short answer is, yes. And it has reaped positive and amazing results.

Even though it's only an hour away from downtown Pittsburgh (just over 30 miles), one of America's largest metropolitan areas and the second largest city in Pennsylvania, Butler County Community College (BC3) and the small city it's located in (Butler), might as well be located on the other side of the world. A large divide exists between the majority Christian white Butler and extremely multicultural and diverse Pittsburgh. In most major cities today, knowledge of other races, ethnicities, and cultural celebrations outside of white, Christian America is the norm. At BC3 it's not. This is not necessarily due to the lack of interest but more so due to the sheer lack of exposure.

The library serves as a repository for the world through the titles it carries - books on every imaginable topic. So it was only fitting that here at BC3, the Heaton Family Learning Commons would help in creating programming related to topics on DEI, not only as a means of bringing the world closer, but also to present actual representations of 21st century life to the students and faculty/staff of BC3. This was part of the college's commitment to DEI.

One of the first initiatives begun was the creation of an all-campus book club, a monthly read to correspond with that month's chosen DEI themed topic. Just as the people here tend to live more insular lives, the same often applies to their literary pursuits (a world filled with Colleen Hoover, John Grisham, and Danielle Steel). Over the last two academic years, a total of nine books have been read, including most notably a transgender memoir (*Sorted: Growing Up, Coming Out, and Finding My Place* by Jackson Bird); a work of non-fiction about the positive effects refugees have had on one Rust Belt city, Utica, which could just as easily have been Butler, Pennsylvania (*City of Refugees: The Story of Three Newcomers Who Breathed Life into a Dying American Town* by Susan Hartman); and debut works by two Pittsburgh-area African American writers, Dr. Anthony Carlisle and Caitlyn Hunter. We were fortunate to have them join us to discuss their respective works (*The Souls of Clayhatchee: A Southern Tale* and *Power in the Tongue*).

However, it was the diverse and unique array of programs we offered to the campus community that we were most proud of. While the 2017 Disney Pixar film *Coco* was for many people their first introduction to the beautiful and poignant Mexican holiday Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead), it was truly brought to life through the erection of the library's own Day of the Day altar in which we asked the campus community to participate by bringing in a photo or special memento of a deceased loved one. Additionally, Pittsburgh is home to a large Bhutanese refugee population and most people could not locate the tiny, landlocked nation of Bhutan on a map. However, the people who attended Mr. Khara Timsina's presentation, in which he shared his personal story about his experience as a refugee and how he had lived in a refugee camp for nearly two decades, something few of us could ever imagine, now have both that knowledge and a better understanding of the human spirit and its unbeatable resilience. And most recently, we had the incredible opportunity to hear from two survivors of Japanese internment camps during World War II. This is a largely forgotten episode in American history and one often not covered in the school curriculum in Pennsylvania.

We are aware that not everyone has or will perhaps ever have the means or time to travel abroad - to go to countries where people look different from them, where religion and culture are so drastically different from theirs. That's where the value and importance of DEI comes in - of exposing not just our students but also our faculty and staff to a realm of different experiences and lifestyles - thus helping not only our students to become global citizens but also the adults guiding them. I'm proud to say that in our corner of Western Pennsylvania, we here at BC3 are doing just that and will continue to build on our efforts too.