

THE STRENGTHS OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Kevin McDonald believes in the power of diversity. His career path has led him on a trajectory to influence higher education's policies and programs for equity and inclusion.

by Danni Francis

When Kevin McDonald arrived on the Andrews University campus in the 1990s as an undergraduate student, the last thing he expected was to find a campus whose diverse community would help prepare him for his significant new position as the first-ever chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer of the University of Missouri System.

Diversity, as McDonald defines it, “is the various mix and combinations of human differences.” He maintains that we have to hold the belief that differences in and of themselves fuel creative energy and insight, and are the points of tension that spark alternative viewpoints and ideas and ignite the kindling forces behind creativity and innovation. McDonald believes if we recognize the important role that our collective differences play, and we commit ourselves to pervasively stress this importance, while striving to create environments and initiatives that promote inclusiveness and respect of all community members, we will have successfully shifted the lens through which we view diversity and inclusion—to see it as a part of excellence and not apart from it.

“What I didn’t anticipate was a compositionally diverse student body, who was engaged, welcoming and inclusive,” says McDonald. “I hadn’t been exposed to the breadth and depth of diversity that I encountered at AU, but it was so refreshing and reflective of the global context AU was preparing its students for.”

At Andrews, McDonald expresses that he found a community of students, faculty and staff who maintained a genuine concern for his wellbeing and future success. Reminiscing, he recalls administrators and mentors like Newton Hoilette and David Knight. He fondly

remembers having men of color on staff who served as wonderful role models. Additionally, McDonald took classes from faculty like Duane McBride and former faculty member, Lynn Caldwell, who got him excited to learn about the contributions that he could make in the world.

Along with his Andrews experience, McDonald’s previous jobs including teaching and leading the diversity efforts at Rochester Institute of Technology and working as the vice president for equity and inclusion at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University.

While at these institutions, he learned a great deal about the importance of understanding organizational climate and culture in performing this kind of work and the importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships with campus and local community members.

“Degrees and professional pedigree may help get you in the door,” says McDonald, “but your ability to forge and maintain strong interpersonal relationships is what helps keep you there and allows you to advance in your career.”

McDonald has learned the necessity of being politically savvy in

order to navigate politically charged organizational waters in an effort to achieve desired outcomes.

While he worked in a similar capacity at his previous jobs, the Missouri opportunity is different in that it is charting the strategic diversity and inclusion efforts for an entire university system of approximately 79,000 students, 6,000 faculty and 18,000 staff. The University of Missouri System is comprised of four institutions each with their own mission, vision and campus culture, and that presents a unique opportunity in the diversity and inclusion arena.



Kevin poses with friends at the Science Complex sculpture while a student at Andrews University in the 1990s. Left to right: Dean Preddie, Oliver Marcelle, Kevin McDonald, EJ King

Recently, the University of Missouri received significant news coverage of perceived racial hostility at one of their campuses—University of Missouri-Columbia. One of McDonald’s tasks will be to establish a plan of action toward relieving those racial tensions.

His first steps will necessarily involve gaining a better understanding of the important issues and opportunities at each institution within the system. He plans to develop an Inclusive Excellence Framework that is both universal in its application across the system, but that also provides significant latitude for every institution to identify where they fit within it.

McDonald intends to identify key strategies that support desired outcomes, and serve as a visible presence in attempting to build important relationships with faculty, staff and students, who have a great deal of skepticism regarding the trustworthiness of administration.

The challenges at University of Missouri-Columbia are those of countless campuses across the country. With the accessibility of various forms of media, especially social media, these realities on university campuses become increasingly exposed. McDonald believes that inherent in the changing demographics and increased diversity on campuses across our nation are opportunities for conflict.

“We must ensure that community members have the requisite social justice conflict resolution tools to navigate these experiences appropriately,” says McDonald.

He asserts that institutions have a responsibility to society and believes if colleges and universities are truly committed to inclusive

excellence, they have to hold themselves accountable for making diversity and inclusion efforts an integral part of their everyday practices.

“Importantly,” says McDonald, “We must understand that the aforementioned expectations are just the manifestation of Christian principles that can’t represent lofty goals or rhetoric, but must instead be operationalized.”

Referencing Jesus Christ, he comments, “We’ve been informed by the best Teacher of all regarding how to treat others, engage others, uplift others, and commit ourselves, so we can’t afford to have select amnesia to applications of his teachings nor self-interpretations of his desired outcomes.”

Describing Andrews University, McDonald explains that the compositional diversity ranking of the university is significant for any institution—not just an Adventist one. He explains that in higher education, there is always talk about preparing students to operate as effective citizens in a global marketplace that stresses the need for multicultural competencies and the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams.

“At Andrews,” says McDonald, “this experience begins from day one, because the University brings an extremely diverse group of students together from a variety of lived experiences, and it asks them to live, work and learn on campus together.”

As McDonald sees it, at an Adventist university whose motto encourages students to seek knowledge and affirm faith in order to change the world, exposure to a plethora of cultural backgrounds enables students to interact in both proactive and reactive ways with diversity.

MOCHA (Men of Color, Honor, and Ambition) students at Rochester Institute of Technology. The one-year initiative was founded by Kevin McDonald, bottom right. Visit rit.edu/diversity/mocha-men-color-honor-and-ambition to learn more.



WHAT I DIDN'T ANTICIPATE WAS A COMPOSITIONALLY DIVERSE STUDENT BODY, WHO WAS ENGAGED, WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE.

On a campus like Andrews, McDonald explains that students will seek out some interactions and navigate others by virtue of diversity being ever present in their classes, residence halls, chapels, Friday evening and Sabbath services, etc. As students hear from and learn about how culture and faith intersect with the rich cultures represented within the campus community, they gain a broader awareness of the world and a stronger understanding of the important role that faith plays in it, and this helps fuel their desire to serve as transformative agents.

“If I were working in a diversity capacity at Andrews,” says McDonald. “I would work collaboratively with faculty, staff, students, alumni and administrators to create an overarching framework that made clear the strong connection that diversity and inclusion have with Andrews University’s pursuit of organizational excellence.”

To do so, McDonald would affirm existing efforts that have aided in the recruitment of a diverse student body, but by also making sure efforts were inextricably bound to other areas like campus climate and intergroup relation, education and scholarship, and the organizational infrastructure.

McDonald would ask questions such as the following to ensure that proper issues and concerns were being raised on campus:

1. How are diverse student populations performing academically, and are they persisting and graduating (what do statistics look like disaggregated)? Are we being intentional in our efforts to academically and socially connect them in ways that create a sense of belonging/community and that build self-efficacy?
2. Are we recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and staff?
3. Are we engaging our multicultural alumni? If so, how and do additional opportunities exist to engage our alumni with current student populations?

4. How are our diversity and inclusion efforts reflected in our policies, processes and practices?
5. How are our current philanthropic efforts designed to include diversity?
6. Are diversity and inclusion important parts of the institutional strategic planning efforts and are they reflected in the compositional diversity of our leadership and our Board of Trustees?

McDonald has been married for 19 years to Kimberlyn and has three children: Rodney Osborne Jr. (currently working on his Master of Divinity at Andrews University), Kayla 15, and Kesslyn, 14. He enjoys singing and developed a love for it while singing in male groups on and off campus while as an undergraduate at Andrews. He fondly remembers being a member of the Black Student Christian Forum, and the many opportunities for music ministry it provided him. He is a vegan who enjoys exercising regularly and watching his daughters play volleyball, describing them as “fanatics” about the sport.

Faith plays a significant role in his personal and professional life. “I remain extremely grateful for the firm foundation that Andrews helped me establish in this regard,” says McDonald. “Every opportunity that I’ve been afforded is a blessing that I’ve never taken for granted and I remain humbled by every blessing bestowed upon me.” ■

Danni Francis is a senior English major at Andrews University and summer intern for FOCUS magazine

OUR JOURNEY TOWARDS INCLUSIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL DIVERSITY

As our world becomes increasingly connected, communities become more diverse. Traditional cultures of origin and educational systems have not kept pace with each constituent’s need for knowledge and training to navigate our progressively diverse world. The demand for diversity competency is no longer an elective option for those who travel but a foundational communication essential for all.

The vast majority of diversity initiatives serve to motivate organizations to become “visually diverse.” The next goal of most diversity initiatives in organizations is to diversify the programming: curriculum, food offerings in the cafeteria, diversity represented in promotional print material, social/cultural activities, etc. Most institutions remain at level one or two.

Andrews University finds itself with a unique opportunity. Due to our position as the flagship educational institution for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which

also includes the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, we have been blessed with people coming to attend Andrews from around the globe for many years. Consequently, we have the visual diversity that so many are still seeking to attain.

This has been noted by U.S. News and World Report, which has listed Andrews University in the top 10 national universities in the United States for ethnic diversity for many years and this year we are listed as number two! As a result of being “gifted” with visual diversity for many years, we have worked steadily to achieve the second goal of diversifying our curricula, cocurricular programming and institutional structure. We have made great strides in these domains and continue the ongoing development in these areas.

This foundation allows Andrews University to move forward to the next level of diversity training and to fully maximize the benefits of our diverse community. We are embracing the opportunity to move from Passive

Representational Diversity to Inclusive Transformational Diversity, through the innovative M.I.R.R.O.R. Diversity Training Program. This involves working with each constituent member of the Andrews’ community to become increasingly aware of biases; and to equip and Motivate each person at Andrews University to develop the skills and training needed to create Inclusive Relationships; develop authentic Respect for Others, and maintain a lifelong commitment to “self” Reflection and personal growth.

Moving towards transformational diversity is part of our strategic plan for preparing the Andrews University community for global service and is essential to fully attain the Andrews University institutional mission to Seek Knowledge, Affirm Faith and Change the World.

Carole Woolford-Hunt is associate professor of counseling psychology and chair of the Department of Graduate Psychology & Counseling and the Institutional Diversity Council