

Storytelling for Social Change

Amy Hawkins, assistant provost of teaching and academic leadership at the University of Central Arkansas, is working to keep diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging initiatives at the forefront of conversations in all university settings.

Hawkins is also an associate professor of public relations at UCA. When she began teaching, Hawkins remembers having several students who were gay describe keeping their true identity from their families, or face being disowned.

“Their heartbreak really changed something in me and opened my mind to lived experiences of people. There was a time where many LGBTQ students couldn’t always assume they were in safe zones. We still have work to do in that area, but we’ve made a lot of progress.”

Hawkins made sure all her students knew they could open up to her. The more she learned about diversity, the more she wanted to help make all aspects of campus more inclusive.

In July 2014, Hawkins became director of what was then called the Instructional Development Center. In that role and in her current position, she leads what is now known as the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Academic Leadership (CETAL). CETAL provides a central office to help faculty members continue to grow and learn. Angela Webster was named associate vice president for institutional diversity the same year.

“In November of 2014 I went to a conference for faculty development, and they had us working with the university’s core values to see if we could identify gaps in our programming,” Hawkins said. “I was going through thinking about areas where we were doing well when it just jumped off the page at me that we were not doing much in terms of diversity. I was like, ‘Oh. That’s not okay.’”

That very night Hawkins received an email from Webster.

“She said, ‘Hey, you’re new in your role, and I’m new in mine. I want to talk about how we can have a meaningful, collaborative relationship.’ I got chills because I thought, ‘What are the chances of these events occurring on the same day!?’”

Hawkins says the rest is history. She and Webster began to lead projects starting with fundamental workshops for faculty as well as a lived-experiences series with students. Hawkins says the lived-experiences series was powerful because, like herself, many faculty members were moved to advocacy after hearing directly from students.

“Those were huge aha moments that we had a lot of work to do,” Hawkins said. “I worked in a small department with six or seven tenure-track faculty, and three of them were people of color or international. From that perspective, we were doing a pretty good job in terms of representation.”

In her CETAL role, Hawkins saw that not all departments were as diverse. “It made me see that just because something was working in one area, didn’t mean it was a university-wide culture.”

Hawkins, who has a doctoral degree in organizational leadership, is also a highly skilled communicator. As an undergraduate, she majored in English and oral communication. Her master’s degree is in interpersonal and organizational communication. Through her educational and professional experience, she has learned that one of the most effective ways to navigate difficult conversations is through storytelling. Storytelling, Hawkins says, helps a communicator meet people where they are.

In summer 2021, Hawkins helped organize and implement the inaugural Teaching Excellence Institute at UCA. It was a week-long event complete with facilitators and training in three different areas: the science of learning, student care and inclusive pedagogies.

The inclusive pedagogies portion began with presenting national and local data that necessitated the focal area. As the week progressed, the attendees learned the working definitions and differences in the terms, “diversity,” “belonging,” “inclusion” and “equity” and what it was like to be someone who was not a part of the dominant group. Lastly, the participants learned ways to consider making classroom climate and curriculum more inclusive.

There were 24 participants at the teaching institute, and Hawkins believes it was a step in the right direction to keep the university moving on the path to being intentionally inclusive. Hawkins said it can come naturally to incorporate conversations about diversity into disciplines like history and philosophy, but it takes more effort to incorporate initiatives like that in STEM disciplines.

“Even a marginal success is good. We had a collective realization of where we are and where we can go from here,” Hawkins said. “Sure I wanted people to be in a different starting point, but it motivated me to be that much more committed to making the university a more inclusive place. I’m glad we have a team willing to work to make that happen. We may not eat the fruit, but we will plant the seeds for someone else to enjoy it.”