

Coastal Carolina University (CCU)
Edwards College of Humanities and Fine Arts
Department of Theatre
10/30/2020

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Response

This past summer, caring, engaged, and deeply concerned CCU Theatre alumni partnered with current students to address their concerns of ongoing division, under-representation, and systemic racism within the culture and operating structure of the CCU's Edwards College Theatre Department. Their initiative required significant honesty and vulnerability on behalf of the students to address a legacy of harm for which the department needed to reciprocate with an apology.

We failed.

We, the CCU Theatre department, were negligent in our responsibility to render care and compassion. We wish to apologize to our students, past and present, for not creating an equitable and safe place for all artists inclusive of their identities, (including race, gender, origin, sexual orientation, or disability). In particular, we acknowledge that we have in cases concerning Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPoC) perpetuated harm and oppression where there should have been communal care, empathy, and support.

We are sorry.

We need to listen, self-reflect, and fortify our support to students who are advocating for a more equitable, inclusive community. We ask this letter serve as a new statement of our collective values: Black lives matter. BIPoC lives matter. LGBTQ+IA lives matter.

The original alumni task-force video and subsequent Zoom presentation, combined with the "Dear White American Theatre" letter written and co-signed by BIPoC theatre artists across the country (www.weseeyouwat.com), was a call-to-action to join companies and institutions around the world in creating meaningful change. The emotional process demanded we re-evaluate ourselves with a different lens and assess the ways in which our department creates and sustains inequity for the people we actually seek to serve: our students. We neglected to acknowledge and face the intensified impacts of interpersonal and institutional harm upon our BIPoC community, gender diverse community, and disabled community. As a team of faculty and staff we were not prepared to collectively respond in the way our students deserved.

We failed.

We, the CCU Theatre department, apologize for our lack of follow-through and response in relation to your DEI presentation. As a department, we began steps to address the issues raised and yet we did not clearly communicate those internal steps to anyone outside the faculty and staff, fostering the perception that nothing was and/or is going to change. We understand that

without personal and collective introspection and without issuing our formal apology, all other DEI initiatives and efforts will fall short. We did not communicate our formative steps in an open or equitable manner, further veiling any attempt of transparency. As a result, our silence compounded the sense of “otherness” and complacency we were trying to address. Furthermore, our attempt to provide equitable storytelling and performance opportunities this fall resulted in a negative impact upon current students. In doing so, we created further trauma to our BIPoC students and faculty, highlighting our inherent biases and inability to leave space for diverse voices within the decision-making process. We thank you for continuing to share your essential concerns with us and keeping the lines of communication open through your collective petitions and stated demands. We acknowledge the pain and triggering that were caused by the situations you experienced. Thank you for your bravery, honesty, and care for each other and for us as a department, and the vulnerability demonstrated in sharing your testimonials. We appreciate your professional approach and your multi-faceted call to action to make structural changes.

As a team of faculty, staff and artists, we are responding with actionable steps as follows:

September 2020

1. Formation of CCU Theatre DEI Committee

This committee is addressing the ways structural racism, classism, heteropatriarchy, and ableism operates in academia, artisanship, mentorship, and the field of theatre studies. The committee members have volunteered to be part of a working group that will develop proposals addressing the material conditions of the department with the aim of making the structural changes necessary for us to actualize the intersectional, anti-oppression vision that we share. The DEI committee will openly collaborate with current students and alumni to collectively audit the successful prioritization of these efforts in partnership with faculty.

Faculty Representatives:

Robin Edwards-Russell, *Assoc. Professor of Theatre (Performance)*
Xavier Pierce, *Artist in Residence (Design & Production)*
Dory Ford Sibley, *Asst. Professor of Theatre (Performance)*
Benjamin Sota, *Assoc. Professor of Theatre (Performance)*
Jonathan Wentz, *Asst. Professor of Theatre (Design & Production)*

Staff Representative:

Melissa-Anne Blizzard, *Costume Shop Manager*

Student Representative:

Jervon Monroe, *by student election*

Alumni Representative:

TBD by CCU Theatre Alumni chapter (*currently being formed at CCU*)

Consultant Representative:

Amanda Masterpaul, *Teaching Associate in Theatre and Women's and Gender Studies*

We seek to address the intensified, specific, and daily ways that structures of inequality exist and are perpetuated within our department and within our local South Carolina Arts community. This includes:

- Weekly meetings of the committee beginning September 9, 2020.
- Integration of DEI initiatives and actions into other departmental committees and student representation on committees, including:
 - Season Selection: Integrating student perspectives in the choice of material/representation (*Nominations for membership currently open. Election forthcoming.*)
 - Recruitment: How/where we recruit; dispelling industry gatekeeping practices (*Nominations for membership currently open. Results forthcoming.*)
 - Curriculum: Expansion of course content, artistic voices, and source material (*see below*)
- Invitations to local SC DEI/BIPoC artists to serve as collaborative voices on the DEI committee
- Creation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) in the department for the formal vetting and approval of published DEI documents, policies, and statements within the department and the greater community
- Formal departmental response to Breonna Taylor case (in support of the ruling and CCU student demonstrations that were held on campus on September 25 and 26, 2020)
- Alignment of the departmental DEI work with the university's Access, Inclusion and Diversity Strategic Plan (2021-2026) and the Edwards College's Immediate Action and Long-term DEI Strategic Plans. (Both are forthcoming)
<<https://www.coastal.edu/dei/>>

2. Theatre Appointments to CCU Edwards College DEI Committees

- Faculty Representative to the College DEI Committee:
Dory Ford Sibley, *Asst. Professor Theatre (Performance)*
- Student Representative to the Edwards College Dean's DEI Undergraduate Advisory Council and rotating member on the Edwards College DEI Committee:
Michelle Garcia, *BFA Actor, Class of 2022*

3. Formation of CCU Theatre Student BIPoC Community Collective (BCC)

The BCC offers a space where BIPoC students can share with one another, be in fellowship with each other, and be sources of inspiration and refuge to each other as a community. The BCC encourages, supports and aligns with current students and alumni to share openly and to address concerns in order to remain mobilized, thoughtful, and vocal in their pursuit of expanding representation within our department, industry and society.

Faculty Mentors:

Xavier Pierce, *Artist in Residence in Lighting Design*

Amanda Masterpaul, *Teaching Associate in Theatre and Women's and Gender Studies*

4. Alumni Representation on CCU Edwards College's Board of Visitors

By invitation of Dean Claudia Bornholdt, a representative of the new Theatre Alumni Advisory Chapter will have a seat on the Edwards College's Board of Visitors. All alumni are invited to apply for membership on the Board and its Alumni Advisory Committee.

October 2020

1. Pedagogical List of Plays & Musicals

Updating our published list of suggested reading to all theatre majors to include more diverse voices, origins and subject matter, specifically to include DEI perspectives in drama.

2. Guest Artist Talkback Series

Diverse theatre professionals are being invited to speak to students to elevate representative voices as mentors and models from the industry, including:

- September 17 @Festival Rehearsal: **Keith Shubert** (*puppeteer, performer, creator*)
- September 23 @Festival Rehearsal: **Liz "Howls" Schachterle** (*performance artist*)
- October 9 @Common Hour: **Kathy Perkins** (*lighting designer, dramaturg*)
- October 23 @Common Hour: **Linda Eisen** (*talent agent*)
- October 26 @Acting for the Camera: **Adetokunboh M'Cormack** (*actor, director*)
- October 30 @Common Hour: **Latiana Gourzong** (*technical director*)
- November 6 @Common Hour: **Yao Chen** (*costume and scene designer*)
- November 20 @Common Hour: **Bill Bowers** (*mime, actor, playwright*)

3. Formation of Monthly "Temperature Check" Departmental Open Forums

In direct response to students' request for transparent communication, the department is committed to a minimum of one monthly open forum during Common Hour where students can engage with faculty, staff, and invited guests about concerns within the department, with the option for breakout session as needed for specific disciplines.

4. Formation Student/Dean Virtual Town Halls (per semester)

In direct response to students' request for open communication with college leadership, Dean Claudia Bornholdt met (without faculty) on Friday, 10/16/20 with interested students for a virtual Town Hall. The meeting was co-hosted by Michelle Garcia ('22). These meetings will continue throughout the fall and coming spring semester.

November 2020

Student-Driven Performance and Authorship Opportunities

In lieu of traditional productions and allowing for social distancing, two alternative productions are planned for limited/streamed presentation centered on student voices:

1. Musical Theatre Cabaret:
Students select their own material and provide individual perspectives in song. (*To be presented November 2020*)
2. Puppapalooza Festival:
Students create, devise, design, direct, and cast their own material and personal perspectives through puppetry, physical theatre and storytelling (*To be filmed November 2020, to be streamed in January 2021*)

Moving Forward

1. Launch of Faculty/Staff DEI Trainings

All faculty and staff in the department will participate in trainings and webinars to bring forward informed changes to identifying our biases and gaining new DEI perspectives. Workshops being scheduled:

Art Equity (<https://www.artequity.org/everyday-justice>)

Anti-Racism as a Daily Practice: Zoom Meeting

Thursday, November 12, 2020, 12:30-4:30pm

Friday, November 13, 2020, 12:30-4:30pm

All faculty and staff in the Theatre Department will participate in the 8-hr. training

Art Equity (<https://www.artequity.org/everyday-justice>)

Finding The Keys: Antiracist Approaches to Radical Recruitment in the Arts

Monday, November 30, 2020, 1:00-4:00pm

Eric Hall, Department Chair, will participate in the 3-hr. training

The Transformative Teaching Collective

(<https://www.transformativeteaching.coop/our-workshops.html>)

Can We Talk? The Labels and Language of Social Identities

Friday, December 4, 2020, 1:00-2:30pm

From Snap Judgements to Micro-aggressions: An Anti-bias Workshop

Friday, January 14, 2021, 1:00-2:30pm

Power and Identity in the Workplace

Friday, March 5, 2021, 1:00-2:30pm

All faculty and staff in the Theatre Department will participate in these three trainings during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Art Equity (<https://www.artequity.org/everyday-justice>)

National DEI Facilitator Training

Spring 2021 (Date TBA)

Dory Ford Sibley and Benjamin Sota will participate in this training

CCU Office of Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and Inclusive Excellence Professional Development Series

Spring 2021 (Date TBA)

All faculty and staff in the Theatre Department will participate in these campus trainings

2. New Initiatives for Inclusive Course Content, Materials and Special Topics

All faculty in the department in Fall 2020 began evaluating playwriting voices to include more diverse and multicultural content for our courses. These included these immediate changes to sourced material (plays, musicals, designers, playwrights, artists, songs, dance and vocal performances) in existing performance, theatre history and design courses.

New Special Topics Courses:

VPA 103 – Visual Performing Arts - Theatre, Protest, and the Performance of Power

VPA 103 – Visual Performing Arts - LGBTQ/Queer theatre

VPA 103 – Visual Performing Arts - IDEA: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility as Theatre

New/Revised Departmental Theatre Reading Lists

Pedagogical List of Plays & Musicals for Theatre Teachers (*Curriculum Committee*)

Updating our list of source content with DEI perspectives in drama.

Perspectives in DEI— Books for Teaching Enlightenment (*DEI Committee*)

New list of suggested reading for Teachers relating to Understanding DEI and Bias

100 Plays & Musicals All Theatre Majors Should Know (*Curriculum Committee*)

Updating our list of suggested reading to all theatre majors to include more diverse voices, origins and subject matter with DEI perspectives in drama.

OUR PLEDGE: Statement of DEI Commitment

The CCU Theatre Department is committed to engaging in transparent communication about developing well-defined initiatives, policies and practices to enhance the diversity, equity, and inclusion of our professional theatre and our educational programming. We are committed to the recruiting and retention of diverse students, faculty, staff and guest artists to our department. We recognize that our previous policies and practices failed to create the vibrant, supportive, and diverse community we want to be. Moreover, we realize that we have not done everything in our power to root out structural systemic racism and assure that our spaces were truly inclusive and inviting to all, and that there is substantive work ahead of us. We will be working throughout this

academic year and in subsequent years with a clear focus and a deep commitment to remedy and enact change to become the theatre community we desire: A safe, responsive, creative home for all the students, faculty, staff and guest artists who enter our doors.

The Theatre Department Faculty and Staff of Coastal Carolina University:

Monica Bell	Melissa-Anne Blizzard
Gregg Buck	Jeff Chase
Regina Duncan	Steve Earnest
Kevin Ferguson	Eric Hall
Alex LeFevre	Amanda Masterpaul
Kris McIntyre	Adam Peltz
Thom Penn	Robin Edwards-Russell
Dory Ford Sibley	Benjamin Sota
Jonathan Wentz	John Woodson