

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

When I look at DEIA work or diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility it's really important that I'm on a campus that is deeply committed to anti-racism work, which I have seen a lot already happen, that is inclusive and participatory in its leadership, which we sought evidenced in the DEIA draft strategic plan that really cares deeply about the process as well as the people involved in enacting change.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so the ability for me to come in and to work with an already strong established team, and to also report to a chancellor who has shown this commitment was very exciting for me. When the opportunity presented itself, I could not pass it up.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast is Mary Grace Almandrez who beginning on June 1st will take over as Syracuse University's new vice president for diversity and inclusion. Almandrez has spent the last 25 years working in leadership roles in higher education, including at Brown University, the University of San Francisco, McDaniel College and most recently, the University of Rhode Island.

John Boccacino:

We are thrilled that Mary Grace is joining the university leadership and we are pleased to introduce her to the campus community on today's episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. Mary Grace, welcome to Syracuse University.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Thank you, John. I'm just as thrilled to be joining the community.

John Boccacino:

Tell us about your background in diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility leadership.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Before I get into sort of what my background is, I need to lead you to the first time I even imagine I would be doing this work. And that's the first day of new student orientation at the University of San Diego. That first night we had a surprise event on the agenda. It turned out to be a huge square dance in the middle of the law school parking lot. And I draw your attention to that moment specifically because I was raised in San Diego. It's very diverse, but at that square dance, I felt the most alone, isolated, confused, even fearful that I made a mistake by choosing the University of San Diego.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And that's because I didn't see any diversity among the sea of 1,000 people. And just as I was turning around to go back to my room, I happened to see across the law school parking lot a small group of individuals with dark hair and dark skin. And I wove my way through the crowd of 1,000 students and I found my way to them. And they turned out to be other students of color who were also student

leaders at the United front Multicultural Center at the university. They introduced me to that center. It allowed me to meet a diversity of different people from a variety of backgrounds. I became a student leader in that center and I would not be the VP for diversity inclusion today were it not for that event. It fundamentally changed my life.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And I realized that I did not want students to ever feel that isolation, that fear, that confusion. And I wanted to take an active role in making sure that campuses across the country were welcoming, were inclusive, were able to provide environments where students and their families and communities can thrive. And so that's one of the main reasons why I actually chose to do this work.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And since then as an undergraduate and throughout my professional career, I've done different aspects of DEIA work, including being a dean of students overseeing a multicultural center, also working on campus climate assessment. So the breadth and depth of my portfolio is really due in large part because I wanted to make sure I was doing work in different parts of the campus that would have the broadest reach in addition to students, how can I also work closely with my colleagues, work closely with alumni and with community leaders who can make this environment inclusive and accessible for all?

John Boccacino:

What exactly when we're talking about diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, what does DEIA mean to you?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

It includes the full participation of all members of our community. It creates opportunities to thrive and to be successful in their respective roles. It is a feeling of belonging, a feeling that I can contribute to the greater good of the community and that my contributions will be valued. It's looking at issues of fairness and of equity. It allows for all members of the community, again, to participate in ways that are meaningful for them. It creates opportunities for, as I did, as an undergraduate student actually reclaim some parts of my identity, explore, express different parts of my identity, including my gender identity, for example.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so when I look at DEIA work or diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, I'm really thinking about how can all of our community members in their respective roles create meaningful experiences for themselves to be successful in their roles? So they don't have to hide parts of who they are that, they can come in as their full selves to contribute and be successful without fear of any kind of harm, psychological, emotional, even physical harm, but that they can be all of who they are and be successful in the community.

John Boccacino:

When it came to Syracuse University and your talents, why was this a good match? Why was Syracuse a place you wanted to take your talents to next?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. So, first of all, the other piece is that Syracuse has a really strong reputation around DEIA. And in particular what makes Syracuse special is around accessibility and also its reputation of being a destination for veterans. As a child of a veteran, I benefited greatly from those benefits. And so I understood what it meant to be able to go to college. My father was a disabled vet and so I was able to take summer courses at the public university for free. My undergraduate was at a private, but I was able to go to college for free.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And actually, in fact, there was a point where my brother, my father and I were all undergraduates at the same time. And that was due in large part of my father's veteran's benefit. So when I look at the breadth of DEIA, it's really important that I'm on a campus that is deeply committed to anti-racism work, which I have seen a lot already happen that is inclusive and participatory in its leadership, which we sought evidenced in the DEIA draft strategic plan that really cares deeply about the process, as well as the people involved in enacting change.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so work the ability for me to come in and to work with an already strong established team and to also report to a chancellor who has shown this commitment was very exciting for me and when the opportunity presented itself, I could not pass it up.

John Boccacino:

Leading up your first day on the job, what are some of the initiatives you've seen from the University that demonstrates its commitment to being an institution that is welcoming to all?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

So a couple of examples I'd like to highlight. First was the establishment of 119 Euclid. And I know that with the leadership of Dr. Alford, that was something of particular significance. I know having been a director of a similar kind of center, the importance of those spaces not only to be physically together with others who might share similar identity, but places of empowerment, places of support, places to rejuvenate. And to be surrounded by people who care deeply about your success and your thriving on campus.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

So that was certainly something that was very attractive to me. The other piece I would say is interestingly when I came for one of my visits, I noticed on the quad that there were two flags I don't typically see on college campuses. And one, I believe was the Iroquois flag and another was the transgender flag. I remember pausing and taking a photograph and sending it to my colleagues and friends to say, "I am going to work at a university where these flags are actually waving on the quad. That I've never seen that happen in all of my years working in DEIA. That was very, very impressive.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

The other piece I want to highlight is I know on my search committee there was a board of trustees member who is deeply committed to this work and was a representative of the board on the search committee, having him serve on the search committee, but also seeing that the board of trustees is engaged in these conversations is really invested in the success of this office and this position, again, was of significance because that's not always the case.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And while a lot of times we might say that we espouse these values. If we don't have the resources allocated to do that, then we really set up those vice presidents up for failure. And I found that Syracuse is really poised for greatness to be both a national, international leader around these topics. And I really am excited to work with the team to do that.

John Boccacino:

We are so excited to have you joining our university campus beginning on June 1st. And I'm so happy that you talked about the brilliant resource that is 119 Euclid. It's welcomed and opened to all. It's such a hub of cultural activity. The food that's cooked in there is phenomenal. The music, the cultural experiences. Do yourself a favor if you're listening to this podcast, 119 Euclid, check it out. It's a fantastic resource for our students of all backgrounds of all ethnicities.

John Boccacino:

It's really a welcoming space for all. And it's one of several outstanding resources that you're going to get to work with in your new role. I want to offer you a chance to talk about two of them in particular, the Intercultural Collective and Multicultural Affairs, which have been staples on this college campus. What do you look forward to most about working with those two entities?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. That's actually where I've come from as well. I used to be a director of multicultural centers, and I used to be someone who oversaw similar grouping as the collective. And so for me, it's actually easier for me to blur those lines between administration and student experience, for example, because at the end we really are student-centered. And so the most important thing is that students also don't need to know where these divisions lie. Because at the end of the day, what they need to do is have the support, holistic support network for them, again, to be successful.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

I'm really excited about drawing from the collective wisdom of my colleagues who are in those areas. They come with an incredible wealth of knowledge and experiences. And if you were to take the number of years of experience that we've had there you'll have over a century. And I like seeing the ways in which the collective in particular is modeling a very holistic approach to DEIA.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

The fact that we also have a disability cultural center. Again, phenomenal, innovative, very different. That's not something that you always see. And so to be able to work with colleagues who come with that wealth of experience and knowledge is very exciting to me, and I look forward to working with them.

John Boccacino:

You've already been to our campus several times before actually taking over in this role. Why was it important for you to get to know our campus and who have you been meeting with so far during your visits, and what have you learned about the university during those in-person gatherings?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. I know that the campus is excited and anxious for the new vice president to hit the ground running, that there has been a lot of work done previously, whether it's the campus climate assessment or the various reports or the draft strategic plan that I'd referenced earlier. And I wanted to make sure that when I start on June 1, I wasn't coming in completely unknowledgeable of some of the foundational and important kind of initiatives to get started on.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

So in my previous visits and in my current visit, I've been able to talk to the chancellor, his chief of staff. I'm also meeting with the provost and several colleagues across campus who do this work on a regular basis and are available and collaborate with the vice president. Both to get a sense of the broader picture, as well as to be mindful of what the priorities and initiatives are moving forward.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And we talked about 119 Euclid and the Intercultural Collective. I also made it a point my first visit to tour those two spaces because I wanted, first of all, to know where they were. But secondly, to get a feel. I was able to come here in April and get a feel of what those spaces are like during the academic year and to see the energy and the buzz and the students in those spaces. For me, I live for those moments because I knew what it was like, again, as I said earlier, to feel isolated and lonely. But to be able to have those spaces on campus, I know the importance of those spaces for retention, even for recruitment and for engagement and also just to be in community. Again, the feeling of belonging and inclusion.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so it was really critical in my first visit that I go to those two spaces specifically, because those are the communities I also serve. Those are the communities I come from and I wanted to make sure that from the very beginning, those communities knew that I was here with and for them.

John Boccacino:

If you can look into your crystal ball, what do you think are going to be the most important priorities right away over the short-term? And then what are some more long-term priorities that you can't wait to tackle?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. After reading some of the documents and looking through my notes and obviously my conversations with community members, I think building community is going to be really critical. Getting people from across campus to not only be together, but to start collaborating and communicating. I know that there's so much good work being done across campus. And I think that we have this real opportunity to now collaborate and streamline some of those efforts so that we are best leveraging our resources to serve our community.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

The other piece is to make sure we get on implementing the DEIA draft strategic plan. It's really important that we follow through with the commitments and the recommendations that our community members have identified. And to look at some of the recommendations that previous consultants have also offered. We really need to make sure we get moving on some long and short-term priorities for that. I think communication is going to be really key. We need to make sure we're

amplifying the good work happening across campus, but also what's happening within the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. And so I've been talking to my team about making sure that we have newsletters that go out on a regular basis.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And the last thing that I would say that's both short and long-term is making sure we have the right organizational structure within the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. We have this real opportunity to identify with the needs of the community, put the right people in place to ensure that we're making progress in these areas.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

There's nothing more frustrating than having committees have these conversations produce excellent reports and then nothing happens, but collecting dust. And we don't want that. We really want to be, again, a national, international leader around DEIA. And so in order to do that, we need to make sure we have the right people in the right places to make that happen.

John Boccacino:

You strike me as an extreme go-getter, a doer, someone who can't wait to hit the ground running with this new position here. I want to reflect a little bit on your past experiences, including your most recent stop as associate vice president for community, equity and diversity, and also chief diversity officer at the University of Rhode Island. What do you think are some of the valuable takeaways from that and your past work experiences that will really benefit our campus community with your starting here on June 1st?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

This is also a nod to what I was just sharing a little bit earlier. I can't stress enough the importance of community building. It's really important to provide opportunities for members of our community from different constituencies, from different colleges and schools to come together, to strategize, to rejuvenate, to be together, just to build a sense of belonging on campus. That is so fundamental.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And what we learn from research is that even if a campus does not have a critical mass, if people feel a sense of belonging and that they can thrive, they will stay at that university. And that includes students, faculty, and staff. So let's create an environment or rather let's continue to enhance and expand the efforts that have been made, whether they're through affinity groups or student organizations. But how can we bring people together so that they know that there are others like them across campus, but that there are also allies who want to work in solidarity with them? So I think the community building is really key.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

The other piece is how do we be respectful of legacy and history while also being innovative? So how we do DEIA work will have the foundations of the work that has already happened prior to my arrival, but it will look different moving forward, because I am different and the students who are coming in and the new faculty and staff are coming in are also going to have different ideas. And so how can we build on the legacy while also being innovative I think is another piece.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And the third is making sure our policies, our procedures, our practices are inclusive. I come from a tradition that allows for multiple voices to be at the table. And if we don't all fit at the table, it's going to move the table. And so my leadership style is one that really draws from expertise and wisdom from all parts of the university. And I think that's going to be really critical as we move forward.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And the last piece I would say is let's do it, let's do the work. Again, we need to make sure that we're doing right by all of those individuals who contributed to the draft strategic plan, but also all the students who had demanded changes. All the alumni who are looking back and saying, "Why is it still like this?" Let's make it different for them. Let's make it different for the future generations. Let's make it different for us as community members who are here now.

John Boccacino:

I think it's refreshing to hear your attitude, your energy. I can tell right away, you can't wait to hit the ground, not just walking, but running on June 1st. And I love your analogy of getting a bigger table. If we don't fit at the table, we'll have to make the table as large as we can to, again, make this as welcoming for everyone on the university campus.

John Boccacino:

I want to pivot to something you brought up that I was not aware of when it comes to DEIA, and it's the veteran piece, the veteran's component. We have prided ourselves and Chancellor Syverud has done such a great job in making Syracuse University the number one place for veterans. Is this a new part of the DEIA movement?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Yeah. And what makes it interesting is that veterans is actually a very diverse group of individuals. When you look at age, when you look at abilities, when you look at race and ethnicity, and certainly Syracuse is definitely a leader in this area. And typically in these kinds of spaces, veterans and even individuals with disabilities don't always get included in the conversations and in those movements. And yet at Syracuse, that is fundamental, it's part of our breadth in terms of how we are and how we talk and how we act at Syracuse.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so certainly Syracuse is a leader around veterans issues. And I mentioned earlier, disability as well. And I also want to undergird that with the fact that we are also racialized individuals, that all these individuals also come with different races and ethnic backgrounds. And it's important for us to also recognize that race is also a critical component as we think about these different minoritized groups.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

If you look at it through a very intersectional lens where we understand how race and ethnicity also play a role in our gender identity, in our class identity, in our veteran status, disability, for example, sexual orientation, gender expression. And so I want to highlight definitely the leadership of veterans that Syracuse has. And I also want to make sure that we don't look at these groups through a very

monocultural way, but we have a more intersectional way in which we talk about these issues in these groups.

John Boccacino:

I want to now go and give you an opportunity to enlighten us into your background. And is there a piece of advice, is there words of wisdom that you were told that somewhere along the way resonated to the point where Mary Grace now every day carries that bit of advice with her? What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

You can't see it now because my office isn't set up. However, in my office, I hang a painting that my brother got for me from the Philippines. I am Filipina and I'm very proud of that identity. And in that painting, it depicts the value of Bayanihan. And Bayanihan refers to a community coming together for the greater good. And how that's expressed in the painting is you will see a group of individuals who are carrying on bamboo poles on top of their shoulders, a hut, a hut made of materials.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And Bayanihan refers to a practice typically in rural villages where the townspeople would come together and help their neighbor move their house, move their hut from one part of the village to another. Everyone from the community who is able-bodied would be able to would help in that endeavor. And at the end, the family would host a fiesta, would host a dinner, a meal for everyone regardless of whether they helped or not. That spirit of coming together, that spirit of social responsibility for the greater good. The spirit of taking care of one another, I hold deeply. And I try to every day espouse those ideals, because that was the value that I was raised with as a Filipina immigrant.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

That is the value that my parents, my extended family, my siblings, every day they embodied that. And while it was never vocalized in terms of a piece of advice or a motto or a proverb or anything like that, it was part of who we were as a community and as a family. And so I bring that painting everywhere I go because it reminds me of the values I hold of treating people with respect, seeing the dignity, coming together for the greater good, not expecting anything in return.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

That's the kind of value that I bring to this work and I think has been really important to highlight so that you all understand sort of why I do the work that I do. That social justice for me is fundamentally about love, love of the other individual, seeing the other as self. And so by Bayanihan and love for me go hand in hand with social justice.

John Boccacino:

And I'm so glad you brought up your cultural identity. At the Syracuse University campus, we are so proud of our cultural heritage celebrations and we celebrated Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in April because all of the students and all the faculty and staff were on campus.

John Boccacino:



I know nationally it's celebrated during May. You're going to be starting in June. So we're kind of in that overlap period, but could you elaborate just a little bit more for us, what exactly your Filipina heritage means to you, how strongly that identity is a part of exactly who you are?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Actually, my dissertation was on Asian, Pacific Islander women in leadership. Both because I saw the ways in which leadership had a very gendered and racialized idea in the ways in which we expressed it or expect leadership to look like, but I would see people like my mother, for example, who wasn't a CEO. She didn't have a leadership title, but she would run this household when my father was away for many months while he was deployed elsewhere and she exemplified leadership, but we don't talk about leadership in that way.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so when I think about the ways in which my ethnic heritage has played a background, I feel it's a responsibility for me to amplify those voices that are often concealed and to dispel myths. You know what's interesting is I actually talk about the fact that many times when people see me, they read me as this ambiguously brown woman. And because my last name is Almandrez, it's Spanish, there are assumptions that I'm Latina. And so I really try to make sure at the very beginning, and I'm very proud to be Filipina.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

So I try to put up in the very beginning in some ways to express my Filipina-ness, whether it's having a Filipina American flag or wearing jewelry that's made in the Philippines or alluding to some of my cultural values, because I think we don't amplify those voices enough in this country. And again, because I'm ambiguously brown, people don't know how to read me. And so I just want to make sure that wherever I go, I'm representing my Filipina American identity, my immigrant identity. And certainly not only as a woman of color, but someone who has experienced different experiences due to other identities that I hold as well.

John Boccacino:

I love the fact that we are so established in celebrating those cultures here on the university's campus. And I can't wait to see what you are able to bring to our campus community in your new role. We spent a lot of time talking professionally. I do want to shift a little bit. Give our audience some idea, what does Mary Grace like to do for fun? What are some of your hobbies?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

You know it's interesting, the chancellor asked me the same thing and one of my loves is actually dancing. And that's actually how my husband and I met, salsa dancing. And so I love salsa dancing, I love to travel, I love to cook and to eat equally, but-

John Boccacino:

You can't have one without the other.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Right, Exactly. I love to cook because I love to eat. That's what it is. I also like being outdoors. So a lot of people have given me recommendations of what to do in the area. And I'm really excited to see Central New York, the Finger Lakes region, especially during the summer. Winter might be different. I'll be doing different things in the winter.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

But I would say dancing and that's very Filipino as well. Like if we don't sing, we dance or we play a musical instrument, but the arts has really embedded in our culture. And dancing has been a really critical part of my life for a lot of my life.

John Boccacino:

We are so pleased to welcome you to the campus. It's been so great to get to know you and tell your story here on the podcast. She is Mary Grace Almandrez. She'll be starting on June 1st. Thank you so much for making the time and welcome to the orange community.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Thank you.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.