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:

So it's important to note that the decision has to do with the consideration of race in the admissions process. That does not mean that we need to back down from our recruitment strategies. In fact, this is a moment when we have to enhance and expand. So we're thinking about how are other ways in which we can diversify our applicant pool, doing really concerted and targeted outreach in areas where there is great diversity, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status, diversity, for example.

It's really leveraging our existing networks with our alumni, our families, our staff and faculty who work here. This is a moment for us to really think about, again, how to enhance and expand, not take away. If anything, we're actually wrapping up our resources in human resources and financial resources, our programming, our initiatives. Inclusion and belonging continue to be at the top.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we are pleased to welcome back our second member of the two-time podcast guest club. She's Mary Grace Almandrez who is Syracuse University's vice president for diversity and inclusion. In Mary Grace's role, she oversees the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, she facilitates critical programs and initiatives, and partners with key constituencies to achieve the priorities outlined in our university's DEIA's strategic plan and academic strategic plan. She's committed to social justice. She's a visionary leader and she brings an interdisciplinary approach that helps advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility issues here on campus. Mary Grace, it's great to have you back on the podcast these days. How are you holding up?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

I'm doing well. Thanks, John, for the opportunity to join you again.

John Boccacino:

Well, I want to set the table for our audience a little bit. This week's podcast, it's a serious issue that I feel your office needs to get a little more credit for the great work that you are doing. We're going to focus on Syracuse University's commitment to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. It's always been a banner of our university that we have been unwavering in our support of and commitment to fostering an environment where all students, regardless of their background can feel welcomed and supported.

But it's a mission that's really been tested by the Supreme Court ruling that came down at the end of June, effectively ending race conscious admissions programs at colleges and universities across the country. Let's start there, Mary Grace. What was your reaction to the Supreme Court ruling and were you surprised, disappointed by what came down from the justices?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Deeply disappointed but not surprised. We have been within the field and within campus been talking about potential outcomes of the ruling for over a year. Certainly when I arrived, that was top of mind for me and my colleagues, and it was really important that regardless of what the decision was, we were going to recommit our unwavering dedication to ensure that all students can find a place here at

Syracuse that our faculty and staff, our community members, our alumni knew that our commitment to DEIA would not end with whatever the decision would be made.

And that's very different from the posturing that other campuses have taken across the country. In fact, even before the Supreme Court ruling, we were aware of at least one campus that preemptively dismantled the equivalent of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion on their campus in anticipation of what might happen in the ruling.

I remembered sitting in that moment reading the article and thinking that could never happen at Syracuse. We have too long of a history of being an inclusive and welcoming campus for us to even fathom that that would be a potential possibility for us. In fact, if anything, we're expanding our resources.

John Boccacino:

This topic of, again, the race-conscious admissions programs, how do we get to this point where it's being put under the crucible and now being reversed by the Supreme Court?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Yeah. There is a lot going on and I think that certainly elections play a big role in that, in how people are positioning themselves across the spectrum in support or against diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. I think, again, in light of what was happening with the Black Lives Matter movement, things that were happening within the L G B T Q community, for example, Title IX, there are so many issues that were actually this point where it was the intersection of all these issues happening at a point where, again, we have these elections coming up and I think people are posturing to decide where do they stand on these issues.

When I went to my professional association meeting in March, there was an opportunity for our colleagues in the various states who have experienced legislation that was dismantling diversity equity inclusion offices and initiatives, and it was heart-wrenching and heartbreaking to see how many of our colleagues across the country are facing such structural barriers with the state legislation now with the Supreme Court decision. On our campus, that has never been a concern for us that we would back down on any of our initiatives.

As I said, if anything, we're actually wrapping up our resources in human resources and financial resources, our programming, our initiatives. Inclusion and belonging continue to be at the top.

John Boccacino:

What kind of impact do you feel this reversal will have? How will it be felt on college campuses across the country and in particular here at Syracuse?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

So it's important to note that the decision has to do with the consideration of race in the admissions process. That does not mean that we need to back down from our recruitment strategies. In fact, this is a moment when we have to enhance and expand. So we're thinking about how are other ways in which we can diversify our applicant pool, doing really concerted and targeted outreach in areas where there is great diversity, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status, diversity for example. It's really leveraging our existing networks with our alumni, our families, our staff and faculty who work here. This is a moment for us to really think about again, how to enhance and expand, not take away.

John Boccacino:

And when you talk about expanding and enhancing, and we are one of the few schools, it seems like that is doubling down, that is almost going in the face of what this ruling has been, what has empowered us? What has made us a special place that in these trying desperate times, we can double down, we can put more resources into this topic?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Yeah. I think there are four areas of distinction when we think about what makes Syracuse University an exemplar, if not a national leader. Number one is we have a long history of inclusion on our campus, whether it is the admissions of Jewish students, of veterans, of Japanese Americans, of women, of students of color. We have a decades long history of doing this at a time when many college campuses were actually closing their doors. So to know that we rest on the work of those who are deeply committed to access is something that makes us especially distinctive.

Secondly is we are a global destination for veterans and military connected families. And as we know, our veteran population is very diverse. Over 30% of our students who are veterans are students of color. I believe about 60% if not more identifies first generation. We have students with disabilities. We have students of different ages.

And so to be a global destination for veterans and military connected families is a point of pride for us. We also have a deep commitment to disability access. We are among the first in the country to have a disability cultural center. We have inclusive view, which provides opportunities for individuals with neurodiversity and intellectual disability to experience full college life. We had the Burton Blatt Institute, so deep commitment to diversity access.

And I think the fourth area where we're distinctive is we actually have an infrastructure that supports DEIA. Almost all of our schools and colleges have A DEIA lead. Several of our administrative units have DEIA champions and we all work together towards common goals and the DEIA strategic plan. That makes us extremely distinctive. So in the face of opposition and intense scrutiny across the country, we're actually one of the campuses that are equipped to continue this work. And if anything like we've been saying, just double down on our efforts.

John Boccacino:

What has been the outreach from your office to current students and to future students, perspective students to maybe try to sway the fears they might be going through over how this will impact their college experience?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

I have to give credit to our colleagues in admissions. They've been working around the clock to ensure that we are reaching different populations that perhaps we haven't leveraged in the past. I've also had the opportunity to go on the road and talk to different communities whether it be with our families or alumni in different parts of the country. We're really trying to ensure that those who are in the community are aware of Syracuse as a viable option and that students know that they have resources once they get here.

I think about The Intercultural Collective, for example, which includes 119 Euclid, an affinity space for our Black students. 113 Euclid, which houses our native student programs, the LGBTQ Resource Center. We have the disability cultural center, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Center for International Students. This place is one where when students come to campus, they cannot be exposed to DEIA. If they walk

through the shine, if they walk through any of our halls, they're going to see a diversity of images, diversity of people of faculty who really care deeply about DEIA.

John Boccacino:

How would you, someone who's a VP of diversity and inclusion, how would you describe the current landscape when it comes to DEIA issues in general on college campuses? And do you think this could be an indicator of what's to come or is this an aberration hopefully, when it comes to withholding and taking away benefits from marginalized communities?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

I think this is a time more than ever where our community members from all sides of political spectrums or perspective identities really need to engage in courageous and thoughtful conversation. I think there have been so many polarizing conversations that have allowed us to really examine issues from multiple perspectives to see the humanity and dignity of the people who are experiencing these issues. I think there's a culture of fear, quite frankly, among DEIA offices across the country of what can we do? What can't we do? How do we show to students that this is a place for them when we have a Supreme Court decision that says we will no longer consider race as part of holistic review.

I will say it's also important that we dismantle some myths and make that clear that while we cannot consider race as part of the admissions process, if a student discusses how race has impacted their lived experience, whether through inspiration or through hardship, for example, difficulty, they can write about that experience. It's not the racial identity in and of itself, but the impact that it's had on their lived experience that they could discuss.

So although we will not be able to see the checkbox of what race or ethnicity of an applicant has put, their lived experience can be considered, and that's something that I just want to make sure we're aware of, is we often say as if students can't talk about their experiences, they certainly can, but admissions officers who are reviewing applications won't be able to identify what their racial background is.

John Boccacino:

Are there other myths or misconceptions out there about the ruling?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

There's some questions around those programs that are considered admissions adjacent, so financial aid for example, or co-curricular programs. And while they were not part of the ruling, it's something for college campuses to keep in mind in terms of accessibility for all to be able to participate in programs. And so I think it would behoove us to think about how do we make sure that all of our programs are available to all of our community members and not creating barriers for people to access those resources.

John Boccacino:

So with that being said, then again, of laying out the structure for what this Supreme Court ruling means here on campus, is it part of an overarching theme of initiatives that are DEIA focused falling under attack and coming under attack in this country?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Yeah. What's interesting is at the same time, we're seeing the dismantling of diversity initiatives under diversity programs and offices. We're also seeing an uptick in campuses creating positions on inclusion and belonging. So on our campus, for example, we use the acronym of DEIA, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. Some campuses have adopted DEIB, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. This year actually, we created a new position, a director of inclusion belonging who has been working on retention initiatives, mentoring program, professional development to provide opportunities for different parts of our campus to build community, to build a sense of connection to Syracuse and to advance in their careers and participate in retention initiatives to allow them to develop their leadership, for example.

So on our campus, we're thinking also not just about on the front end, how do we get people here, but how do we keep the most talented scholars, students, employees, instructors here on this campus and allow them to thrive in their respective disciplines or areas of interest.

John Boccacino:

It's a really important point to note. And it's also important to note too that, again, we are not going to back down. We're going to continue to be a champion, if you will, in these DEIA issues, especially in light of these recent legislative challenges. I know you mentioned some of the factors that allow Syracuse to be that leader, to be that champion, if you will, of these DEIA issues. What are some other examples you can point to? I know you mentioned diversifying the applicant pool. What are some other concrete, almost like counterculture challenges that we can continue to embrace to continue to be that leader in this field?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

We've seen also a rise in interest in faculties and staff in particular want to build affinity groups. For example, we have a new affinity group for Jewish faculty and staff, an affinity group for faculty and staff with disabilities. One for those who support and are part of indigenous communities. So there's this back to basics, if you will, where community members are saying we want to be a community with people who share common interests, may share identities, and we want to be able to celebrate who we are and to ensure that we are keeping up with one another, caring for each other, supporting one another through their various aspirations on campus. So that's one. The retention piece is really, really critical.

John Boccacino:

It's evident to anyone who has listened to you talk that you are so passionate about this line of work. I know we talked about this a little bit in your previous episode, but just do a rehash for us of why this topic of making it inclusive and a welcoming atmosphere for all of our students, why is this a passion for you?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

I often talk about my experience as a first year student at a university that was also a predominantly white institution. At that time, there were about 7% of our community who identified as students of color, and that actually included international students because at that time, they actually combined those statistics. And so I would bet it was probably a lot lower in terms of percentage and demographics. And I remembered feeling uncertain, confused, frustrated at times, angry that I didn't see a diversity not only among my classmates, but among my instructors and the employees in which I worked.

I worked a lot in student organizations and many of the advisors who worked with our student groups did not have diverse perspective. And so I felt like, "Well, if we can create opportunities for us to interact with one another, to build relationship across difference, to have real meaningful relationships, even with people who share different ideological views, how amazing would this college experience be?"

And towards the end of my senior year, I got to feel a little bit more of that, and that was through my involvement in the multicultural center on campus. And that center actually anchored me to campus. It provided me the opportunity to thrive, to explore different parts of the campus that I probably wouldn't have, including student government and orientation.

I would like to create opportunities for all members of our community to be able to experience that thriving, to feel like they belong, that they didn't make the wrong choice, that they're where they're supposed to be and they could be successful in the classroom. They could be successful in their labs on the athletic fields, wherever it may be, where they work, live or study.

John Boccacino:

I think that's one of the most frustrating things from an outsider's perspective, these issues that are being attacked. They don't harm. I mean, they're helping. They're helping to enhance. They're helping to create this infrastructure where who doesn't want to feel welcomed, who doesn't want to feel supported when they go through and try to pursue their higher education dreams. That's why we're always so proud of what you and your colleagues are putting forth when it comes to initiatives that are really making a difference in the lives of our students, our faculty, and our staff.

I want to transition to a really cool opportunity to come in for campus members to participate in the DEIA symposium that's taking place on October 3rd. It's an awesome day of programming and conversations that are going to really challenge a lot of our community members who attend to maybe rethink their positions or to take on a new stance to hear about the awesome initiatives we're doing here on campus. How would you summarize like from a surface level what can be expected at the symposium on the third?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

So the symposium is going to highlight a lot of promising practices, research and creative works from our students, faculty and staff that advance, DEIA across campus. We're going to be featuring 18 concurrent workshop sessions, seven express talks in 23 posters that will highlight a variety of areas from, I know John that you're presenting, right? Communications, disability access, racial justice. We have architecture students, for example, talking about creating a hostile in Syracuse University. We have IVMF who's going to be talking about resources for veteran students.

We really cover the gamut of the breadth and depth of expertise, research and creative works across this university, and we're so excited and proud to amplify that work and to provide opportunity for inspiration. We're hoping that those who participate in any way, whether it's attending a workshop or presenting a poster, for example, that people leave feeling inspired, that they want to continue advancing DEIA in their spheres of influence, and that they understand that regardless of the decision that's been made with the Supreme Court ruling, we are continuing our commitment. We are unwavering in our commitment to diversity and inclusion.

John Boccacino:

And I think that's again evident when you consider just how many proposals your office received for the symposium. Almost 60 proposals from staff, students, and faculty. That's got to be reassuring to know that there's broad and intense community buy-in when it comes to participating in these symposiums and making them the best that they can be as far as a learning experience.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Absolutely. And again, when you look at the schedule of what we are offering, there's so many different kinds of workshops that we think will be attractive to different parts of the campus. In fact, we also know that we have already received interest to do a part two or some kind of follow-up to the symposium, which we will definitely do. There were a few proposals that we weren't able to accept for various reasons, and now we want to make sure that we provide a platform for others who in the symposium weren't able to showcase their good work.

We'd like a follow-up. We're thinking about even creating a syllabus or reading list, for example, as a result of what we've learned during the symposium. So we want this to be a springboard and not the end of how we showcase our good work. We really want to not only amplify, but encourage people to be change agents within their respective units.

John Boccacino:

And speaking of being agents of change, I feel like the symposium is one of those incredible initiatives that really puts us ahead of the curve. How are we a leader when it comes to DEIA initiatives in the symposium? What really sets this symposium apart from other institutions of higher education?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Because our campus also has a broad definition of diversity. We include disability access, for example. We include veterans. We include religious communities. We have a very broad definition of DEIA and I think that's what makes us special and that's reflected in the symposium. The breadth and depth, the caliber and the quality that you're going to see in the workshops and the talks is something that makes us a leader. I also think that you will see interdisciplinary teams present, so not just one school, not just one presenter. You're going to see also teams of students alongside staff and faculty. So students are co-educators, for example, and that's an incredible opportunity for us to highlight as a leader in DEIA.

John Boccacino:

If you go to diversity.syr.edu and you search for the symposium, you'll come to a website that has a full rundown of programs we will link out, of course to the registration on this podcast, but I do want to highlight what I think is a really powerful session. It's that lunch and keynote panel discussion. What will be taking place and is it open to all members of the campus community?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

It is absolutely open to all of our Syracuse members, faculty, staff, and students. And this panel is going to talk about our unique role and our unique contributions to the Supreme Court decision, particularly with Chancellor Syverud and his work on the Grutter case. And we're going to talk about not only how did we get here since the Grutter case, but what are the actions and next steps that we are taking that will showcase that we are undeterred and unwavering in our commitment to diversity.

John Boccacino:

I encourage everyone who's listening, and it's not too late to go sign up for the event too. How can people complete their registration? What's the process like?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Absolutely. We ask all of those who are interested in attending any of the sessions or all of the sessions to please register by September 25th. You also can volunteer. We need volunteers at all parts of the day from 8:30 to 5:30 if you're interested. You're also welcome. There is a link to a registration form as a volunteer. We highly encourage you to attend. And if you can't attend, encourage your roommates, your classmates, your colleagues to attend.

John Boccacino:

It's fantastic. October 3rd is another extension of the great work that Mary Grace and her team is putting forth to. Again, make sure that this is as welcoming and open of a campus environment for everybody who wants to participate. Now, along those lines, we have this amazing living breathing document called the DEIA strategic plan. And I hear you've got a little update for us about the revamped mission, revamped efforts that are part of the strategic plan. Can you give us a little summary as to what we can expect and when this might come to light?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Sure. So the DEIA strategic plan was provided to the community in 2021. We've had a little time to review that plan in light of the changes, not only in legislation, but changes in leadership on campus. Considering the launch of our new academic strategic plan, we are going to be relaunching the DEIA strategic plan document as a framework. We are going to retain our five overarching goals which span everywhere from cultivating an inclusive and welcoming environment to recruiting and retaining faculty, staff and students to leveraging DEIA across the infrastructure and of course around disability access, promoting that throughout the institution.

We're going to republish this as a framework with those five main goals. And our council on diversity inclusion, along with leadership across the campus, is going to be working with their respective units on how they can advance the goals of this framework. And then every year we're going to maintain a dashboard to showcase progress to date on those five main goals.

John Boccacino:

And the fact that these are, again, so important, so impactful, these are not just a set in stone, set it and forget it, document the fact that you're hearing. We can rework them, we can incorporate feedback. It really helps set us apart. How unique is something like this in the higher ed landscape?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Oftentimes we create these DEIA plans or DEI plans on some campuses and they collect dusts on a shelf. And then it comes to the next iteration in five years. As you said, this is a living document, but we also know we need to be held accountable to this document, which is why we want to ensure that we have a dashboard that is current, that is updating our community on milestones, that's identifying other gaps that we might see along the way that will allow us to adjust and make changes as needed in light of new initiatives such as the academic strategic plan. So we want to be nimble, we want to be responsive, and we want to be dynamic.

John Boccacino:

And Mary Grace, I think one of the best parts about what you've brought to this campus community is you are easily accessible. People can come schedule meetings. You hold open forums. What has your experience been like, putting yourself out there, being vulnerable, but also showing that you're an ally? What kind of interactions have you had with our campus community in those settings?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

We did a tally last year of how many presentations I had done on and off campus, and they were, I believe, 76 that I did last year. Again, on and off campus. I was in DC. I was in other places as well. We also hosted two campus flora. We had three e-newsletters. We had weekly memos that we sent out to partners and I piloted open hours on a monthly basis in the spring. All of those have been proven to be successful in the engagement with campus community members.

In fact, it was because of the first campus forum that students raised to my attention, the needs of our indigenous students in 113 Euclid and important renovations that needed to be made to create space for meetings, for gatherings, for programming, for studying. So we worked alongside with facilities, with academic affairs, with the registrar's office, for example, to make sure we create more space for our indigenous students and their allies to gather and really find a home in 113 Euclid. It was also through my open hours that I was hearing some of the concerns that were happening around campus climate within their departments and the ways in which supervisors either support or create barriers to inclusion and belonging in their respective departments.

So these avenues have really allowed me to find out what the issues are and work alongside my colleagues to mitigate and to address these issues. So this year we've moved from monthly in person to bimonthly open hours, so I have them in person and virtually we will continue doing the open flora. In fact, our next one in October is going to feature an interview, a living room fireside chat, for example, with our new vice president in student experience, Dr. Don Singleton.

We want to introduce her to the community and let folks get to know a little bit about her. We also worked closely with our stop bias team and the dean of students team, for example, to showcase a new report that provides information on bias incidents that we've had. So a lot has happened because people have been willing to share their experiences and they know that we take them seriously.

John Boccacino:

I know that your office is always constantly thinking of what you can do to be better allies to make our campus really reach that full potential that we strive for. My last question for you before I let you go, in these challenging times, I know you're always going to keep striving for our students, our faculty, and our staff. What's next when it comes to some racial equity, some social justice work, what could be coming down the pike along those lines in this challenging environment?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Yes. One of the requests that we've gotten from a number of individuals and departments is they want to have more professional development around issues of racial justice and DEIA broadly. In the spring, we're going to be hiring a new director of learning and development who will be working alongside colleagues across campus to create a micro-credential or badge program that will allow individuals, faculty, staff, and students to participate in a set number of workshops and learning opportunities to get electronic badges or a micro-credential.

We want to have a core curriculum that is foundations of DEIA, and then we want to have specialized badges for issues related to racial justice, for example, or veterans or disability access, or LGBTQ, or gender equity. So in the next year or two, we're really going to be ramping up resources to provide more learning opportunities across campus.

John Boccacino:

It's refreshing to hear that I know that your work never stops. I know that it might be frustrating dealing with this changing landscape, and I also know that we're in really good hands when it comes to these issues of DEIA here at Syracuse University. She is Mary Grace Almandrez, the vice president for diversity and inclusion here at Syracuse. Keep up the great work. Keep your head up and please tell all your colleagues we appreciate everything they are doing to make this campus really be the best that it can possibly be.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Thank you, John.

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.