Theme: Care and Recovery during the Pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Our theatre students were deeply impacted by the Pandemic. One of our students died by suicide, on the last day of finals week in the fall 2019. He had been cast in the spring musical just a couple of days before. The majors had no opportunity to grieve together or help each other and because school was over, we couldn’t provide them with any counseling. They came back in the spring to do the show, but without him, it just wasn’t the same. The show closed, the students were all sent home for spring break and never came back together to process what happened. Their last two shows that had already been cast and were in rehearsals, were cancelled. The London trip was cancelled. Students who had been excelling in their classes before, began struggling to do any work at all. Our students would play D&D online all night, then sleep all day. The Spring semester ended, many of them failed classes they should have aced, there was no graduation, and for the sophomores who were transferring, their whole future was put on hold. It was a scary time for everyone. Then George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were murdered and for me that was the last straw.

ACTION PLAN

I enrolled in a three day zoom workshop through *Teacher Talk Live* and *Get Your Teach On* entitled *Be About It: Unpacking White Privilege, Bias, and Anti-Racist Instruction*. I took pages and pages of notes but I can boil it all done for you to one sentence: “I became aware that racism deeply impacts all the work I do in theatre; It is my job as a teacher to counter the racism inherent in the theatre industry with anti-racist practices through conscious effort to reduce harm, prevent harm, and repair relationships.”

In short, I went on to complete four more similar workshops throughout the next school year culminating in completing a DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) certificate at Cornell last summer, 2021. The process made me look at my campus and my department in a whole new way.  I was required to create and propose changes in my workplace at the end of every two week course during the eight week program that addressed Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. This presentation will detail what I did and how.  During all this, I worked closely with our newly formed DEI department on campus as well as with HR, student activities, our counseling center, our TRIO department, our food bank, our community clinic, our success coaches, our Men of Color program, our academic advisors, my VPA colleagues, my department head and my division director.  I could not have done this alone.

I will tell you in advance that my department head and my division director gave me the green light to implement every single initiative.

1. ​COURSE CONTENT REVISION: DIVERSITY

Upon completion of the *Be About It* workshop, the first thing I did was write and post a trigger warning on all of my syllabi: “ I teach this class through an anti-racism lens. Theatre, historically and currently, deals with complex and controversial issues; it is often challenging and at times uncomfortable. It would therefore be impossible to offer a meaningful introduction to theatre that did not engage with potentially difficult issues including systemic racism, Antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, ageism, and body-shaming.” The next workshop I did was called *Anti-Racist Theatre: A Foundational Course* by Nicole Brewer. She pointed out that you can’t possibly help the whole world but you can concentrate all your effort into one “beloved community”. After completing that workshop I added the statement, “My beloved communities are LGBTQIA and Neurodivergent youth”.

1. REPRESENTATION MATTERS DISCUSSION BOARDS: DIVERSITY

With that done, my next step was to remove every trace of “old, dead, cis/het, white guys” and replace them with women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ. That led to creating my *Representation Matters* presentations. It started with just one, but as these things often do, the project took on a life of its own and grew into thirteen separate pdfs. They are Black, Jewish, Native American, Latinx, Middle Eastern/Muslim, AAPI, Cultural Misappropriation, Women, LGBTQIA, Neurodivergent, Physical Disability, Body Positivity, and Ageism. They were inspired by my friend Manny Velez who teaches Chicano Studies at Mesa College in California. I had tremendous help in compiling these presentations. I got alums and colleagues who were that specific identity to curate them for me to make sure my language was respectful and that I was using positive, as well as popular and culturally relevant examples. They are meant to serve as a jumping off point for Discussion Boards in which students are required to participate by posting an original opinion and then replying to another student's post.

1. ALUMNI REPARATIONS: JUSTICE

The first step in my action plan, Justice, was to make reparations to alumni. We had some very toxic faculty in our department over the years that negatively impacted our reputation and caused a lot of damage to our students. I began by making a database of our alumni and reconnecting with them over the summer. This included 300+ people that I taught over the last 25 years.  I did my best to apologize to each and every one of them for the harm that was caused by these former teachers and assure them that those faculty were no longer teaching at our campus.

1. SEARCH COMMITTEE: EQUITY

I told the alumni that during our search for yet another scenic designer, I would personally see to it that the position was advertised to women's colleges and HBCUs and that the search committee would interview female and BIPOC candidates so that our new hire would treat the students with respect, and would be more representative of our student population. I sent emails to every HBCU in Texas and neighboring Southern states that had a theatre program, as well as posted it in USITT’s FB groups Women in Theatre network, Queer Nation network and BIPOC network. I regret to report that no BIPOC candidates applied for our job, however for the first time in 25 years, we had two female candidates. Yet we still ended up hiring a white, cis/het male.

1. ALUMNI WALL OF FAME: DIVERSITY

The next step to fulfill the Diversity part of the action plan was to select the most successful alumni, focusing on female and BIPOC alums to honor them with their photos and bios framed and hung on the interior wall of our Music and Theatre building. We had a formal dedication ceremony during our November production where we invited all the honorees to campus to see the show. The department paid for catering, and it was a great networking opportunity for our students.

1. ALUMNI MENTORSHIP: EQUITY

Out of the that initiative, grew another one that fulfilled the Equity part of the action plan. I realized after a student's suicide combined with an entire year of doing productions and teaching classes during the pandemic, our students were not doing well.  They were having mental health crises, they were dropping classes, flunking classes, they were not auditioning for shows, etc. Anyway, they needed serious help. In talking to the alumni I realized that they were our best source of help for our current students.  We used an app called Mural to brainstorm ideas for creating a mentorship program over the summer which we then implemented at the beginning of the fall semester.  We started with @30 mentors. Participation in the program was voluntary.  Students were given a handbook with our parameters for the mentorship program and a supplemental index of potential mentors with their photos and bios.  Students were given a week and two zoom meet and greet conference calls to give me their top three choices of mentor and then were assigned a mentor by me. Mentors met with their mentees one on one seven times during the fall semester. All of the mentor/mentee pairs chose to continue the relationship in the spring.

One of our mentors, Melissa, now works for the IRS. She prepared a budgeting and tax preparation lesson for all the mentees. Another one of our mentors, Darlisha, is a paper artist and she designed custom handmade journals/planners for all the mentees. Chris, a wannabe makeup artist was paired with Jayla, a professional makeup artist who also has her own line of cosmetics. Danny, wannabe dresser, was paired with Jason who was the wardrobe master for *Disney on Ice* for a decade. Jeff, a wannabe anime voice actor was paired with Andrew, a professional voice actor in Houston. James, a wannabe costume designer, was paired with Whitney, a professional costume designer in DFW. Alyssa, another wannabe costume designer was paired with Shanna, a former cutter/draper for Houston Ballet. Rye’sha, a victim of parental abuse, was paired with Kelly, a survivor of parental abuse. Aaron, a victim of domestic violence, was paired with Izzy, a therapist who works at the Family Abuse Center. Stella, an opera student was paired with Dani, lead singer in a rock band. John, a South Korean wannabe actor/singer was paired with Angela, a South Korean opera singer/college professor. Even the alumni themselves found ways to mentor each other. Laura, a lawyer for the AG and a single mom, was paired up with Lacey, a singer/songwriter single mom. Their kids were the same age and they’d both moved back to Waco after their divorces to be close to the grandparents for help with raising their children. Brayden, a recent graduate who was attempting to start her own deaf/hearing theatre company, Silent House, was mentoring Will, a deaf alumni actor, and was being mentored by Dakota, who had started his own theatre company in OK.

1. GENDER AND SEXUALITY ALLIANCE: INCLUSION

To fulfill the Inclusion part of the action plan, I restarted the McLennan Pride student organization.  All student orgs had been put on hold during the pandemic.  The former faculty advisor of the organization had retired during the pandemic, so there was a gap that needed filling.  So many of our students are LGBTQIA and they needed more support. I volunteered to become the faculty advisor and reached out to all our majors to join the group.  We changed the name to Gender and Sexualities Alliance to make it more inclusive. As a part of the club activities, the GSA hosted the Alumni Wall of Fame dedication ceremony. We will be hosting a drag show this month and in April we will be volunteering at Planned Parenthood to safely escort clients through the protestors into the building.

1. SEASON SELECTION: INCLUSION

Additionally, many of our non-binary students and trans students have gender dysphoria and Dissociative Identity Disorder. When we were picking the season last spring, we chose two LGBTQIA shows to do in the fall semester to reinforce the idea that our LGBTQIA students were important to us.  We picked She Kills Monsters by Qui Nguyen, which focuses on Agnes’ relationship with her sister Tilly who died before she could come out as a lesbian. Our second show was Passage by Christopher Chen. Although it is based on EM Forester’s A Passage to India, Chen has removed all the character names and place names so that it can be about any hot button issue the director chooses. Our director, Joe Taylor, chose to make Country X inhabited by LGBTQIA characters played by LGBTQIA actors and Country Y inhabited by Cis/Het characters played by Cis/Het actors.  It was a bold beginning to our school year and made the statement that we really cared about them and their issues.

1. CAMPUS WORKSHOPS: INCLUSION

**Academic Advisor Training**: One of our academic advisors asked me to participate as GSA advisor with my students in a training session for all the academic advisors (100+ people) for NACADA web event: “Creating and Holding Space for LGBTQIA students: A Conversation” <https://my.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Product-Details?ProductsDetails=yes&ID=B34> in which students of the GSA listened to the live stream of the presentation with all our academic advisors. Afterwards they were invited to tell their own stories of their advising experience on our campus: the good, the bad, and the ugly to highlight areas that need improvement. One major issue was the need to address students with their preferred names and pronouns during every interaction while at the same time not outing them in front of their parents.

**ADA Training**: Then I did an event hosted by the DEI department to provide ADA training for faculty. There were many sessions and the event lasted all day. I participated in a roundtable discussion with other campus employees who were themselves disabled or who were the caregiver for a disabled person. The point was to go beyond accommodations and address the impact that disability has in terms of campus life and student engagement. I spoke about autism from the perspective of my son and my many theatre majors and the difficulties that they have encountered in accessing services as well as being understood by their teachers and feeling seen in the classroom.

1. ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

**Homelessness:** three students were homeless before school started and we got them into safe and affordable housing.

**Abuse:** four of them were being abused, physically and/or sexually. We got them all into therapy and out of their abusive relationships and living situations.

**Therapy:** most of our majors are now in therapy either on campus or off. We have had zero suicide attempts this school year.

**Jobs:** Seven of them didn’t have jobs to support themselves so we got them on scholarships, and/or workstudy. I personally took one of them to a hiring fair.

**SPED students:** We introduced the Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation Services to our autistic and disabled students to help them with getting jobs.

**Success Coaches:** we got five of them in with success coaches.

**TRIO:** We signed up two students for TRIO.

**Auditioning:** The musical pre-pandemic was Chicago, we cast 21 actors out of the 30+ people who auditioned. Last year we had 9 people audition for 8 roles in our spring musical and we still had to bring in a female alumnus to do one of the female roles, because we didn’t have enough women audition. This spring we had 30+ people audition for 11 roles in our musical.

1. DATA DRIVEN EVIDENCE

Supporting our students by lowering their drop count, raising their GPAs, keeping them in school, and minimizing absences.

**Retention:** Only three majors didn’t come back after Christmas. Of those, two did not participate in the mentorship program, the third did, but his family was forced to move out of Waco due to his dad’s job. He is still in contact with his mentor.

**Enrollment:** My course enrollment has gone up significantly this school year from last year. Last year I had 6 students in costuming both semesters, 9 in makeup, and we had to cancel Intro to Design because only one student enrolled. This year I had 8 students in costuming in the fall and 9 in the spring. I had 12 in makeup, and we had 3 enroll in Intro to Design.