### 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

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

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. and im856 0 BDC 0 Tw -36.#hi06-3 ¢f twrt caT 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 worT 0 Tdion

I worked a lot in student organizations and many of the advisors who worked with our student groups did not have diverse perspective. And

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

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. te 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 • š CE šplan 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.

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.