The UA’s second annual Inclusive Excellence Symposium drew more than 300 for a day of workshops and talks by diversity and inclusion experts from the UA and beyond.

The symposium, held last Friday, was organized by the Associated Students of the University of Arizona, the Department of Religious Studies and Classics, the UA Health Sciences Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and the Office for Diversity and Inclusive Excellence. The event's theme was "Inviting Communities to Dance: Sustaining a Culture of Responsibility, Accountability and Collaboration."

"This symposium is intended for us to come together to think about, explore, pose solutions, envision a different and better future and take action," said Jesús Treviño, the UA's vice provost for inclusive excellence and senior diversity officer. "Ultimately, we have to be committed to take action; otherwise, things are not going to move forward."

Amanda Kraus, director of the UA’s Disability Resource Center and interim director of Housing and Residential Life, delivered the symposium's opening keynote. The lunchtime keynote speaker was Damon A. Williams, a national expert in strategic diversity leadership and one of the original architects of the inclusive excellence concept in higher education, which says that an institution or community's success depends on how well it values the diversity of all its members.

The event also included three rounds of concurrent workshop sessions, each an hour and 10 minutes long. Workshop topics included, among others, men's role in confronting gender-based violence, recognizing and respecting indigenous people in higher education, writing diversity statements and understanding stereotypes and myths about Islam and Muslims.

Kraus, in her talk, sought to reframe some common beliefs about disability before explaining ways the UA community can be more inclusive to those with disabilities. Historically, Kraus said, people with disabilities have been viewed as being in need of a cure or have been pitied for a perceived deficit. But Kraus argued the built environment and poor design are what lead to inequities for people with disabilities.

"We treat them like their needs are special when their needs are to park a car, sit in their class, to take your test, to live in the residence halls," Kraus said. "Those aren't special needs, but because we have been operationalizing this thinking, they become special because our environment has not been designed with everyone in mind."
Moving the focus from individual needs to an environment that serves everyone is a more sustainable practice, she said, adding that many people with disabilities have the same needs as everyone else on campus.

Achieving inclusive excellence, Kraus added, involves creating "environments and experiences where everyone feels welcome without the need for any sort of special modification, request or accommodation." An example of a step in that direction on campus, Kraus noted, is the entrance to the Arizona State Museum, which was rid of stairs in a remodel several years ago.

These forms of universal design are more proactive in making experiences the same for everyone, Kraus said, and can be implemented in all forms of University life. Providing accessible transportation during events, offering alternative formats for tests or handouts, and captioning classroom media were examples Kraus offered as small steps toward a more inclusive and accessible campus.

"Doing these little things means that someone does not have to go to the DRC and make a request," Kraus said.

In Williams’ keynote, he began by pointing to the symposium itself as an indicator that the UA is taking important steps toward institutional diversity and inclusion.

"The work that we are doing here today at this symposium is not simply a matter of comfort and convenience," Williams said. "It's also about how do we embrace this notion that in a changed world, this is the work of excellence?"

Williams spoke of a perfect storm driving the discussion of institutional excellence surrounding diversity and inclusion. That storm included the rise of new generations of students who "will not go into any closets," and the prevalence of social media those students now use to make their voices heard.

Williams said the work happening at the UA's Office of Diversity and Inclusive Excellence was among the best in the country, but added that striving for diversity and inclusion at a more micro-level across the UA was key.

"We all know that our institutions are large and they're complex and they're decentralized, so it's really important that we have localized conversations where this is really defined in terms of what it means in a business school, what does it mean in engineering," Williams said after his talk.

Williams left his audience with a parting thought summed up in just a few words: "Commitment without currency is counterfeit." In other words, diversity and inclusion initiatives require sustained funding to be successful.

"If we're committed," he added, "we're making financial, fiscal investments in the work in order to empower people to do the work in order to truly, truly lead change."

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