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“Time for me to come home” says Pacific’s inaugural VPDEI

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Dr. Mary J. Wardell-Ghirarduzzi is the inaugural Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer at University of the Pacific. She will begin her new role on July 1. In the first of a two-part interview, Wardell-Ghirarduzzi expounds on the challenges and opportunities ahead and her philosophies.

What makes the position at Pacific the right fit for you?

Dr. Mary J. Wardell-Ghirarduzzi: The year 2020 is one where many historians kept a journal to document all that happened. It was also a year of discernment. I know, for me, as well as for other folks, there has never been a year like 2020 in our professional lives. Things started to click for me that it might be a time to consider a different leadership role. I was not looking for a job. But lo and behold, here comes a new president at Pacific named Christopher Callahan.

When I think about the opportunities in California and about how to do this important DEI work, the three leading cities in Northern California are San Francisco because it is an economic and cultural powerhouse, Sacramento from a governmental and political standpoint and Stockton, my hometown, as one of the nation's most diverse cities.

As I listened it became clear to me that Pacific was not only a place that I should consider, but that it was now time for me to come home. Stockton is where I went to school. I attended Delta College and Pacific is my alma mater. It was kind of like the perfect set of coordinates coming together. I think about growing up here and the opportunities ahead and it was just the right move.

During a Pacific Alumni Association session last year, you gave definitions for the words diversity, equity and inclusion. Can you elaborate on those definitions?

Wardell-Ghirarduzzi: Diversity is simply the presence of diverse people. The idea about diversity and being diverse is really about representation. The work of diversity is still not done, even in 2021. There are many professions which have not yet met the opportunity.

Inclusion is the idea of how can we create spaces of belonging, where everyone feels that they have a voice.

Equity deals with fairness. All equity work demands that you look at the historical pieces and how certain individuals or groups have advantages over others. The equity work is more difficult, more demanding. It takes institutional will and individual commitment. It takes leaders who will be stewards. I do think Pacific has a platform to think about equity today and how we address it across all programs.

Are you a goal setter? And how would you describe your approach to DEI leadership?

Wardell-Ghirarduzzi: I am a goal setter. But I'm not dogged. Meaning that I believe in the manifestation of one's heart and desires. It's part of my cultural DNA to have this optimism and hopefulness in spite of evidence that things have historically been in despair. So I set goals, because I am an optimist. I do believe I am able to look back and see where there has been growth.

I have done this as I prepare for my transition from the University of San Francisco. I look back at specific changes in our diversity representation. I look at the number of women faculty in the STEM areas, and I am so proud of what we have accomplished. The same goes for many other areas.

When I think about Pacific, I want the university to have a broader footprint nationally (in DEI). I am internally competitive and I want to see all that we do at Pacific as being explicitly great. It's like I told President Callahan: "Let's crush it."

There are considerable DEI efforts happening at Pacific's three campuses. How do you take these well-intentioned efforts and coalesce them into a university-wide approach?

Wardell-Ghirarduzzi: Well, the good news is that, if this work is already happening, it won't be hard to pull us into a cohesive strategy. It would be difficult if this work was not happening. But with progress already happening at Pacific, my job is like being a conductor.

There will always be certain areas, certain departments or divisions that will be featured at various times. I want to make sure that we have a common language when discussing our efforts.

Part of my work is to help those individuals in various departments fan the flame to what is already going on at Pacific. And, if necessary, I will set little fires if they need to be set. But they will be good fires.

As we move forward, I truly believe that students will have many of the best ideas about what Pacific should do.

The announcement of your hiring mentioned that you also would have a faculty role. What type of classes do you hope to teach?

Wardell-Ghirarduzzi: At USF, I taught classes in management and education. I am very interested in history and also potentially in communication classes. I could see myself teaching a class such as "Race and Diversity in Communication." My classes will be relevant to what is going on and we will respond in real time, and I will teach with a lot of passion (Wardell-Ghirarduzzi also has served as president of the San Francisco Public Library Commission).

You once said, "We have not seen anything like this since the 1960s, with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. If we do not respond now, then when will we respond?" Can you reflect on that comment and the times we are in?

Wardell-Ghirarduzzi: We have to respond to the call when it comes. I believe all of us are being called to answer this call of equity and inclusion right now in a very distinct way. What we do, and how we answer the current DEI call, is going to determine what happens for many years.

Coming in Part 2 of this interview: Among the topics Wardell-Ghirarduzzi will discuss are the concept of being an anti-racist organization, racism against people of color, becoming strong transformative allies and building depth into DEI efforts.