

# Come together

*Changing ingrained social norms  
is a long-term investment.  
The University of Oklahoma is all in.*

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

**P**erhaps the one common denominator that unites us is that we are all different. Respecting differences in others while voicing our own values can become a challenge, particularly on a college campus where students, faculty and staff from around the world converge to live, learn and work together.

*Everyone brings their own set of values to the table.*

*continued*

Opposite, from left, D'Andre Fisher, Jabar Shumate and Pam Hicks are poised on the threshold of a new era of openness and dialogue among OU community individuals and groups. In addition to its presence in Evans Hall, University Community has offices at 730 College Ave., which is headquarters for Disability Resources and Veterans Affairs, and on the OU-Tulsa and OUHSC campuses as well.

# UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY





# Creating a community

where tolerance, inclusion and acceptance among more than 20,000 unique individuals might seem like a Herculean task, particularly when the results of these efforts may not be immediate or readily evident. To find someone who is up to this challenge, look no further than Jabar Shumate. The longtime state legislator, University of Oklahoma alumnus and one-time press secretary to OU President David L. Boren was tapped by his former boss less than two years ago to establish the Office of University Community.

As vice president of this endeavor, Shumate has spent the past 18 months laying the foundation for an enhanced climate of diversity and inclusion across each OU campus. Anyone who sets foot on the university ultimately will be touched in some way by the department's initiatives.

These include a presidential mandate for all incoming freshmen and transfer students to attend diversity training within their first year on campus, increasing OU's recruitment of underrepresented students, workshops for faculty and search committees on hiring practices, and the establishment of the Faculty and Staff Diversity Council to examine and provide advice on diversity issues campus-wide. And this is just the beginning.

"President Boren had a vision of what he thought this office should be, so when I started in June of 2015 I knew what he expected," Shumate says from his office in Evans Hall. "A mandatory training for incoming freshmen focused on diversity and inclusion was the number one priority. OU is one of only a handful of universities in the nation to make this part of the freshman experience."



Travis Caperton

Student ambassadors play a key role in the mission of University Community and their observations and input provide valuable insight to administrators. Here, Jabar Shumate chats with, from left, DeAndre Martin, Danielle Rutledge and Adan Gutierrez.





Travis Caperton

The University of Oklahoma received the 2016 Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award, the only national award that honors institutions for being outstanding examples of colleges or universities committed to making diversity and inclusion a top priority. The award is given by *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, the largest and oldest diversity and inclusion publication in higher education.

Now in its second year, the Freshman Diversity Experience is centered on five core pillars: the diverse OU family, being aware of difference, understanding stereotypes, learning to interact, and personal responsibilities. Classes are taught through the freshman orientation called Camp Crimson, Gateway to Learning and stand-alone training sessions.

“This training is conducted in groups to foster dialogue,” Shumate says. “We want to teach active listening, what it means to stereotype people and how it feels to be in, or kept out of, a group.”

After serving four terms in the Oklahoma State House of Representatives and a partial term with the Oklahoma State Senate, Shumate was moving in new career directions when he got a call from Boren about returning to the university in early 2015.

“I told the president I was not available, but that I would help him find the right person,” he recalls. “My wife said at the time, ‘Maybe we should consider this opportunity if something happens and they need you.’”

Shumate pauses and quietly adds, “Well, something did happen.”

When the nine-second video of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fra-

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ternity members singing a racist chant went viral in March 2015, the president took immediate and swift action. The OU chapter of the fraternity was closed and the two students leading the chant were expelled. Again, Boren reached out to Shumate.

“My wife saw how President Boren handled the situation with the SAE video and felt that OU was where we needed to be, that we could make a difference here,” Shumate says. “His response, the zero tolerance he articulated for that kind of behavior, made it possible for someone like me to come in and do this work.”

Diversity is not limited to race. Indeed, the Office of University Community is charged with creating a place where people representing a “multiplicity of identities” are made to feel safe and respected. At the same time, the office is focused on attaining diversity in recruitment, retention and advancement of students, faculty and staff who are from underrepresented groups and communities.

The all-hands-on-deck undertaking spans the breadth of resources on campus, from the president’s office on down. Shumate is captain of the ship and is supported by numerous departments, the Office of Student Affairs and a five-person staff.

He is quick to point out that understanding what a diverse, inclusive culture looks like has been part of OU academic pursuits for years. But now it is on center stage.

“My office is like an umbrella. We are looking at the work of diversity and inclusion that already exists to create an excellent environment to support our faculty, staff and students. We are the centralized office for this endeavor. And there is a lot of work to be done.”

An Academic Diversity Council advises Shumate from a faculty perspective. As a member of that council, Dr. Belinda Biscoe is charged with leading what is called a “Theory of



Warren Queton, the university’s tribal liaison and associate director of University Community, speaks to the crowd at OU’s second annual Indigenous People’s Day, which has replaced Columbus Day as a university holiday.

Photo provided

Change” process across all three OU campuses. It is a systematic method to evaluate a specific situation to promote social change. Think of it as a guided roadmap toward achieving desired outcomes, with short, intermediate, and long-term action steps along the way.

“In the past, we have taken a bit of a hit-and-miss approach regarding diversity and inclusion,” Biscoe says. “President Boren is a decisive leader who has put in place the creation of a diversity experience that will be impactful. Students who enter OU now understand diversity and how important it is to embrace that. The Theory of Change process helps us determine what needs to be accomplished in this regard, and lays out a plan on how we are going to get there.”

Growing up in the segregated South, Biscoe has made the study of diversity her life’s work. As associate vice president of OU Outreach’s Public and Community Services Division, Biscoe oversees a vast programmatic operation that includes the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies. In 1988,



the center hosted the first annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE<sup>®</sup>) to address a resurgence of racist incidents in higher education.

Nearly 30 years after its inception, those issues are at the apex of higher education once again, and the conference has become the leading and most comprehensive forum of its kind. With a focus on the complex work of comprehensive institutional change in higher education, particularly for traditionally underrepresented populations, NCORE<sup>®</sup> 2016 set an attendance record of more than 3,500 participants.

“We are taking a systematic approach,” Biscoe says. “This is a three-to five-year plan that will ultimately guide us to measurable results, such as increases in minority faculty, staff and students who are recruited and retained at the university. Diversity and inclusion are my life’s work and my life experience combined. This is personally and professionally very important to me.”

Shumate says long before he was approached about the vice presidential position, before the SAE video, the president had met with every dean on campus to explain that OU would be taking a comprehensive approach to diversity issues, and that he would be hiring a chief diversity officer.

“Although there had been progress in this area, the president wanted every college to have someone on staff that had diversity and inclusion as part of their job,” Shumate says.

Until December 2015, Yvette Walker served as night news editor for the state’s daily newspaper, *The Oklahoman*. Now, as assistant dean of student affairs for the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication, she is helping to prepare the next generation in an industry where race and diversity are front and center. She supervises a diversity officer in the college and is actively involved in creating a climate of dialogue to foster understanding.

“Diversity is a huge topic because it is a part of the media world,” she says. “We are the storytellers, and with the five divisions we have here, diversity is a factor. Our students will be charged with writing and describing our world. Diversity, race and gender; those are all part of that world.”

She cites a number of examples where the college is tackling those difficult issues with its students. “OU Nightly,” the student-produced broadcast news show, has a sister broadcast, “OU Nightly in Spanish.” Gaylord College also hosts a chapter of the Association of Women in Sports Media for female students pursuing careers in the male-dominated field.

A sign on Walker’s door identifies her as an Ally for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community. She says she was interested in becoming an LGBTQ Ally to deepen her own understanding of this group of students.



Photo provided

Heather Shotton, left, assistant professor of Native American Studies, receives the National Indian Education Association Educator of the Year award from president Yatibaey Evans. Hiring more outstanding faculty like Shotton, representative of OU’s diverse student body, is among goals set by university administration.

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“As a black woman, as a minority, you think you know about these issues, but then I became an Ally,” she says. “This training caused me to stop and say, ‘Oh. I had not thought about that.’”

The Ally program is a three-hour training offered by OU’s Center for Social Justice on ways to advocate and provide resources to students who identify themselves along the LGBTQ spectrum. Participants sign a commitment form to become an official LGBTQ Ally.

“The sticker on my door tells students my office is a safe place to come and talk,” Walker says.

The Ally program is an initiative of Women’s and Gender Studies. During its first year in 2008, the program trained 58 people. Today, there are 1,200 trained Allies on all three OU

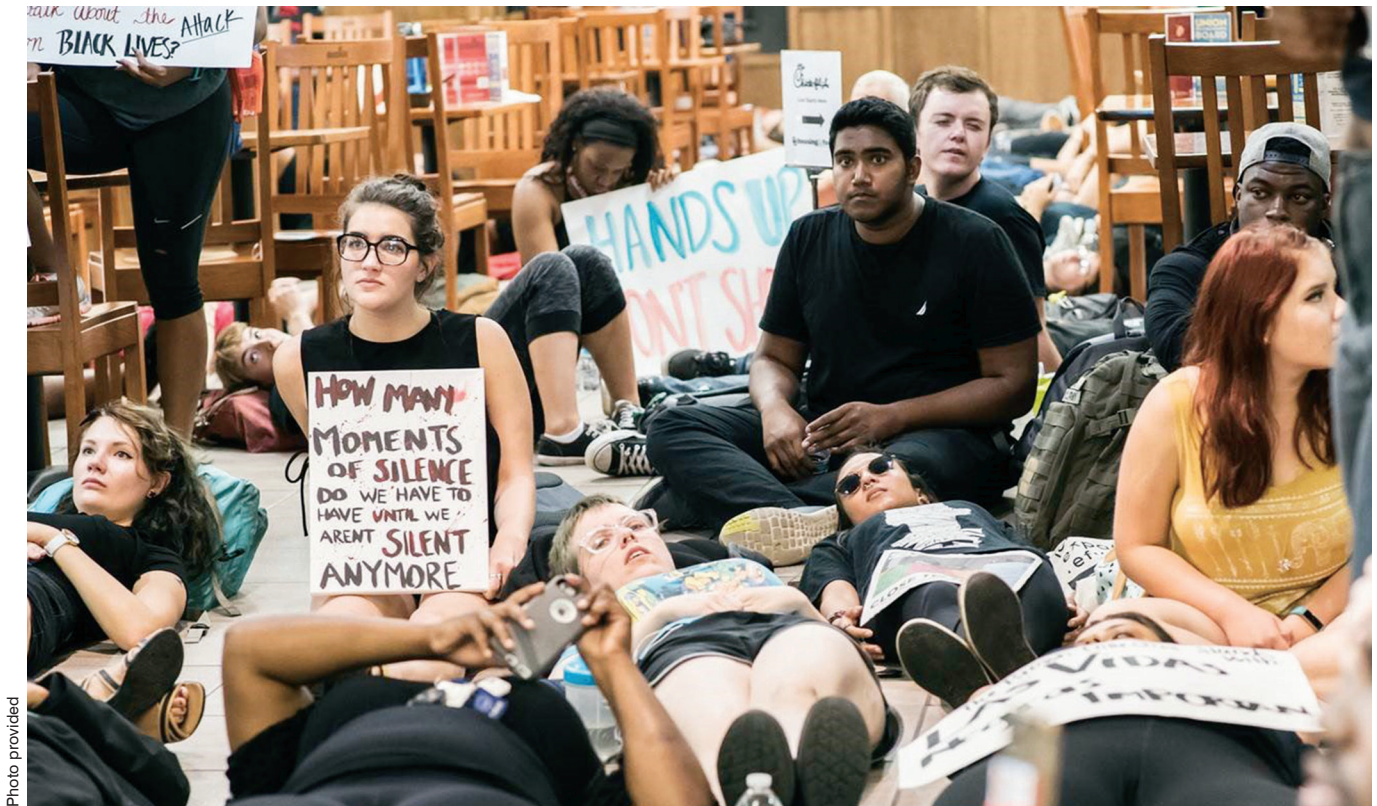


Photo provided

Students join in a peaceful protest in support of Black Lives Matter at Oklahoma Memorial Union after the police shooting death of Terence Crutcher, an unarmed African-American man, in Tulsa on Sept. 16.

campuses and, since its inception, more than 4,500 faculty, staff and students have been through the Ally curriculum.

“This training has been very popular on campus,” Shumate says. “We are working now on developing an ally program for faculty diversity, with areas of ‘unlearning’ focused on sexism, racism and ageism. The LGBTQ component is a part of this training. By 2017 we will kick off a staff ally diversity program as well. What we hope to do is begin with mandatory training and then create more opportunities for learning after that.”

The University Community Center is located in the renovated former SAE house and home to a number of programs that support the diverse campus community initiative, ranging from Veteran Student Services to the Henderson Scholars Program. Named for Dr. George Henderson, dean and professor emeritus of human relations, education and sociology, and a longtime civil rights activist in Norman, the program honors his vision and efforts. It is designed for a select group of incoming students to learn the valuable lessons of community engagement during their OU tenure.

Angie Wright heads the 10-year-old program. “The Henderson Scholars honor the vision and efforts of Dr. Henderson and introduces a select group of students to think independently so that when they leave the university, they are changed,” Wright says. “We want our students to leave as leaders, and this program is designed to help our students become that next generation of leaders.”

The cohort of 120 students must have a cumulative grade point average of 3.3. They represent diversity in all forms and are accountable for volunteering in the Norman and Oklahoma City area.

“Our students learn from day one that there are people who are different from them, that the world is not a cookie cutter place,” she says. “The one common denominator is that we all are different. We foster our students, teach them to be respectful of one another.”

The work of the Office of University Community is not limited to campus. The vision of an inclusive university begins with recruiting students in middle and high school, reaching out to engage prospective faculty, retaining those groups, and ensuring that the university is a safe and supportive place in which to learn and grow.

Change of this nature does not happen overnight. But OU’s efforts are beginning to show up in enrollment numbers. In 2015 the Norman campus saw freshman minority enrollment increase by more than 7.6 percent.

Shumate and his wife have built a house in Norman. They are here for the long haul.

“I am truly excited by the progress Vice President Shumate and his office has helped bring to the campus,” says President Boren. “It has helped OU become a true role model for making diversity a real source of strength for our OU family.”

*Susan Grossman is a freelance writer living in Norman.*