Introducing the Davis Center

By MIKE REED
Vice President for Strategic Planning and Institutional Diversity

Williams is not the same college it was when the Multicultural Center was envisioned and established in the late 1980s. The College population and community are more diverse and complex and less easily defined and categorized than they were then.

Since 2005, the MCC Advisory Committee has reflected on the need for a major reinvention of the Center’s services, programs, and presence. Indeed, the College had experienced dramatic demographic changes, yet the Center’s offerings have remained virtually unchanged. The Committee believed a name change was an essential component of this reconceptualization; it was deemed equally important to honor the legacy of activism that led to the Center’s creation. While not without challenges, the College continues to embrace the transformative opportunities that are necessary to provide an equitable educational experience. We hope to encourage this type of leadership—student, faculty, and staff leaders committed to improving the College and society at large; the Davis Center acknowledges our past accomplishments as we prepare some of the brightest minds to be future leaders and change agents.

The individuals who fought to establish the Center are to be admired and revered for their visionary and courageous efforts and, today, undoubtedly fight to expand the Center to be a more inclusive space and an even greater catalyst for institutional change. Since its inception the Center has consistently expanded its outreach and operations while the mission has remained steady.

While many of the tenets of the Center remain relevant, if not essential, the needs of the community have expanded. We don’t as easily fit into culturally distinct categories and identities. To accommodate and accurately reflect the expanded range and nature of the work that the Center is currently engaged in, it essential to continue to embrace cultural pluralism while simultaneously addressing current needs for social justice and educational equity.

In 2009, the Advisory Committee proposed that the Center’s mission be accomplished through three main channels: 1) academic excellence (through transformative education); 2) support and programming for students from underrepresented racial/ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation (through Identity Empowerment); and 3) social justice learning, advocacy, and activism (through Social Change Leadership).

We believe that the pioneering work of W. Allison Davis and John B. Davis provide us with the kind of expanded vision to maintain the commitment to the core purpose of the Center, as it was conceived and yet stretch to address the evolving and yet unknown challenges of the future.

A publication dedicated to social issues and critical thought

October 2012

Staff Committee sheds light on this year’s mission

By LYNN M. MELCHIORI
Chairman, Staff Committee

The Williams Staff Committee (WSC) represents a group of individuals who have a diverse and multifaceted collection of skills and life experiences. The WSC has important goals meant to not only increase the visibility of the staff that work here at Williams but also increase their role in the life of the College. The committee is comprised of eleven individuals who have been elected by the staff with the charge of providing suggestions and input to the senior administration and the broader college community, as well as offering an avenue of direct communication within the staff community.

The word “staff” at times fails to convey the true depth of our abilities and how we individually view our jobs. Working with a sense of both personal pride and pride in the wonderful institution of Williams, we can be found working at all locations of the campus and at all hours.

The “all locations and all hours” part quickly came to the forefront of our thoughts when trying to decide on the best way to communicate with everyone. Our first challenge has been to determine ways in which to provide an easy way for staff to send us ideas, suggestions, and yes, even complaints. Email and online forms, of course, are easy enough to implement, but not all of our staff have access to email throughout the workday or the time to sit down at a computer to fill out a web form. We posted signs that tell about our group, but soon realized that we needed to take a more direct approach: the time-tested ‘suggestion box’. With plans of placing eight boxes at strategic locations around campus, we hope that staff will be more apt to provide their views on a variety of topics. The fact that these would also be anonymous in nature may prove to be a plus.

Feeling that we needed to prove ourselves as a ‘can do’ committee, we decided, at our second meeting, to work on two reported concerns right away. One of these is a problem that many employees have with finding parking. Those who work the evening shift often have to park at a distance, placing the individual in the uncomfortable situation of having to walk in the dark, alone, at the end of his shift. The parking garage has limited parking available during the winter months due to icy conditions on the ramps, necessitating the closing of a level.

Another topic that we are looking into has to do with the reported need of having an ombudsman available, acting as an intermediary to resolve problems and conflicts in situations affecting the work life of members of the Williams College community.

The WSC hopes to accurately portray the full range of talents that the College depends upon and work to further enrich the work environment for each individual staff member. From the outdoor work being done at the crack of dawn in the constantly changing Berkshire weather patterns to the fast-paced, high-stress jobs involving constant deadlines, around-the-clock creativity and diligent accountability to those positions responsible keeping the College’s infrastructure up and running in both structural and technological support, WE are Williams!

Please read more about what we are involved in by visiting us online at: http://committees.williams.edu/c-group-names/williams-staff-committee and send us email: wsc@williams.edu
Meet the Staff …

**Lili Rodriguez**

Favorite Purple Valley fun:
“Horseback riding, hiking, canoeing, camping, snowshoe and skiing.”

Best TV show:
“I look most forward to watching “Community”; It’s hilarious and smart and gets as all sorts of developmental issues.”

Favorite book?
“Anything by Vonnegut or Octavia Butler”

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From:
“San Diego (Poway), California”

**Taj Smith**

Fears:
“Heights”

Favorite cultural dish:
“Rice and beans”

On my iTouch:
“Lupe Fiasco, Usher, Fela Kuti”

**Amy Merselis**

**Justin Adkins**

**Gail Newman**

**Marcela Peacock**

**Languages**:
“English and German”

**Family**:
“Husband and 13-year old daughter”

**Alternate career**:
“Symphony orchestra musician/morning person”

**Student Staff**

Taylor Bundy ’13:
Content and Layout
Editor-in-Chief

Alexis Akridge ’15:
Social Theory, Community
Spotlight and Activism at Large
Writer

Rhi Alyxander ’13:
Arts, Gender and Sexuality
and MinCo Writer
Surviving in the Margins: The Resilience of Poor Jamaican Women

By JALLICIA JOLLY ’14
Contributing Writer

As Jamaica celebrates its fiftieth year of independence, Jamaicans near and far have praised the nation for its astonishing achievements in sports, academics and national development, while others have critiqued it for its daunting economic conditions both internationally and locally, high unemployment rates and inability to advance as much as other Caribbean nations.

Trinidad & Tobago has surpassed Jamaica in its overall economic development, although both countries gained independence from the British in 1962, merely a just a week from one another. Throughout my time in Jamaica, I did not hear much critique about the country’s inability to develop an infrastructure that can allow it to become independent and not rely on other nations for natural and economic resources, or the Jamaican government’s complete disregard for the poor men, women, and children who struggle to feed their children, pay bills, and fund educational needs.

While Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller and her Parliament colleagues spent millions of Jamaican dollars to create a lavish celebration to flaunt Jamaica’s independence to the international community, men, women and children in Raytown were struggling to understand why politics and power translated into cyclical poverty, violence and death.

This reality makes me wonder: Have Jamaican women create useful survival strategies to help them cope with the burdens of poverty, which involve developing and maintaining familial networks of support.

This summer, I was eager to understand how the collective methods used by grassroots organization Sistren Theatre Collective and women in the 1960s and 1970s embraced the principles—such as democracy and collectivity—of the Manley Administration.

After participating in the Mellon colloquium, I traveled to Jamaica and had conversations with women in downtown Kingston in order to understand the benefits and limitations of poor and working-class women’s survival strategies. However, my previous argument was completely challenged when my first participant, Ms. T, stated bluntly in our first conversation on day one on the island: “Sometimes mi av fi ask God… ‘Ow mi ah gah survive?’ Ah me do everything fi mi self.”

Ms. T, a single mother of two, lives in a room in a boarded one-family home in Raytown. Cardboard boxes serve as her windows and a flimsy, thin curtain serves as the partition between her room and the veranda. Making only $41 a week, she still managed to purchase food, pay two separate school tuitions and cover other basic needs. When her paycheck does not cover the costs of food and tuition, she accepts help from a close family member.

While there are attempts in Jamaica to create and sustain communal networks, the individualistic mindsets that prevail in communities with low resources undermine efforts to maintain communal support networks. Thus, Jamaican women living in Raytown and Franklintown rely on familial networks domestically and abroad than on communal ones—a finding that connects to cultural values that honor family. While the reappearance of themes such as individualism, “suffering in isolation” and “striving to survive” reveal the distrust and the fear of betrayal that cause many Jamaicans to create insular familial networks, they also reveal the resilience and hope embedded in their spirits.

As I continue my research, I am eager to examine the factors that strengthen individualism in order to help envision effective ways that Jamaican women can mobilize and create communal and grassroots efforts for social change. Using a womanist and human rights based framework, I will turn to the voices of poor Jamaican women in order to reveal the importance of self-empowerment and collectivism in addressing extreme poverty in low-resource communities.
Insight is understanding the motivations behind one's thoughts or behavior. It is about uncovering the truth behind our feelings, motivations and realities. It is the ability to see past the symbolic, and critically dig for the deeper meaning.

Incite is arousing an emotional or cognitive impact that causes a commotion. Incite is NOT about creating 'trouble'. It is about urging people to be aware of what is taking place. Incite is what you DO to broadcast your insights.
By KAREN CARDOZO
Director, Career Discovery Program

At Williams you are exploring your identity in multiple dimensions and addressing social justice issues that both inspire and challenge you. How might you move those engagements into the wider world and into the life you envision leading after Williams?

Questions of diversity and social justice bear upon the realm of career exploration in several ways:

First, some organizations or roles within them are explicitly committed to redressing social inequalities, others tangentially or not at all. So when contemplating working with a particular organization, a deciding factor for you may be: what is its mission or purpose?

Second, you might consider what it means to make a difference to the working world and to take particular geographic locations. Likewise, not all students feel free to “pursue their passions” when family or communal commitments are at stake, including financial obligations to self and others. Counselors at the Career Center and other campus advisors can help you explore funding and programming resources; we want to support all students in the career exploration process. You need to identify your constraints and limitations so we can help you problem-solve around them.

Third, our cultural and family backgrounds often shape how we think about the working world. That is why it is important to take advantage of multiple exploration opportunities during college, so that your future decisions are informed ones.

In short: diverse identities and commitments leave many students wondering how to balance financial and philosophical concerns, individual and communal needs, as well as short and long term goals. Here are some programs and resources that can help you begin to sort through these issues:

First, visit the Career Center’s getting started link on the Students homepage (at careers.williams.edu/students/) to review the three main questions underlying career exploration: Who Am I and Where Am I Going? (engaging in self-assessment and goals/values clarification), How Do I Get There? (learning new search tools, skills and strategies) and How Did YOU Get There? (finding alumni and other career mentors; doing field-specific research).

A change in career exploration process might itself be the difference that determines whether and how you put difference to work in the world! Be in touch (kmc5@williams.edu) because students can be the change they want to see.
Chris Abayasinghe came to Williams in 2006 when Paresky opened its doors, and in his almost six years at Williams, he has seen and orchestrated a plethora of influential changes in Dining Services. Here he reflects on the beauty of the Berkshires, the characteristics that define Williams students and what he’s done before taking up residence in the Purple Valley.

If you could sum up your experience in a few words, what would you say?

“Truthfully, I don’t think that I can! I was truly indescribable. I learned so much both academically, as well culturally and spiritually.

What made you decide to spend your summer in Egypt?

“I took Introduction to Comparative Politics with professor [Jim] Mahon the spring of my freshman year. For our final papers we had to pick a country and analyze its political situation using theories that we had talked about throughout the semester. I chose Egypt, which was then going through the revolutions that led to the abdication of dictator [Hosni] Mubarak, and later, I got interested in the aftermath of the protests and wanted to see how the new government was progressing.

As a political science and Arabic major, I thought that this would give me a great opportunity for real-life application of the things that I was learning in class, so I built a research proposal that would allow me to do just that.”

What impact did this trip have on you?

“Being in Egypt opened my eyes not only to different ways of living, but also to different conceptions of human existence and varying methods of cognition and understanding the world. It definitely made me re-think my own value system and what I would consider important.

Being somewhere outside of what many people would term “the West” made me hyper aware of my own—sometimes blinding—views that are so based in the culture in which I have been raised.

This really allowed me to open my mind and re-conceptualize not only my own culture, but my, and other humans’ relations to their own societies.”

Maya Hawkins-Nelson ’14 spent this past summer in Egypt, where she aimed to change the role of women in Egyptian politics following the revolts that occurred over two years ago. Here she shares her insights and experiences—from improving her Arabic to gaining an outsider’s perspective of “the West.”

How has Williams come to embrace this diverse group of students where food is concerned?

“Our program has invested the resources and training to help build a culinary team that is versed in diverse ethnic cuisines. As an example, when we re-opened Mission Park in 2010, we invested in buying a tandooni oven. Since then, we have improved on our Indian cuisine, to a point where any student who has experienced dining at Mission would say that the food is authentic.

“We’re extremely fortunate because the makeup of our staff include members from nations as varied as Camboodia, Honduras and Colombia. We are extremely fortunate from that perspective.

“We might work with WASO for example, or the international student group, or CASO, or a number of the groups through MinCo. We have established relationships with these student groups and their student leaders.

What exactly did you do during your time there?

“My main project was researching the changing role of women in Egyptian politics after the revolts that Egypt had two Januaries ago. Doing this research required some reading, but lots of interviews of Egyptian people, getting their opinions on the country’s political affairs.

On the side, I as also was able to improve my Arabic by doing language exchange with this amazing Egyptian girl, and taking Arabic lessons from an equally awesome Egyptian woman. Surprisingly, I feel like my conversations with these two women gave me more cultural insight and understanding than I could have ever gotten out of the hour-long interviews that I was doing.”

What if you could sum up your experience in a few words, what would you say?

“I went to school for economics, and upon graduation there were a number of set career paths for those with economics degrees. The path I chose was management consulting. I worked for a company in Connecticut called So-dex-o Alliance, a multi-national consulting company, until 2006, and then I received the appointment for assistant director job here at Williams. I moved here in January to open Paresky.

“I think at that time I was looking for a change in my career… applying what I had learned as a management consultant to a place like Williams turned out to be exactly the change that I was looking for.”

In your opinion, what is unique about living in the Berkshires? Where do you live and what is the most interesting feature about this area?

“I was the son of a diplomat. We lived all over. What makes the Berkshires unique is that I just love the area. It’s beautiful. The Berkshires were to me just absolutely breathtaking when I drove down the valley for the first time.

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Tell me something interesting about your family.

“I have a wife, Natasha, and two beautiful boys, Liam, 4 and Aidan, 2. Two definitely Irish names.

Do you have Irish history in your family?

“No, but my first name is Irish, as a child growing up, a lot of my friends couldn’t pronounce my name, so they thought it was ‘Irish.’ As to the whole Irish tilt to my children’s names, my wife’s favorite actor is Liam Neeson, and in Gaelic Liam means “strong willed defender” and Aidan means, “the furry one.” Those are the characteristics of both my boys, to the tee.

What would you say are the most important things that you’ve learned from students over your time here?

“They are very driven, they are passionate about the causes they believe in, and they require you to be flexible. We do a lot of student life programming, when it comes to Heritage Dinners or certain fundraiser events and stuff like that. So I get to interact, along with my management team, with students who are seeking support for their causes… The ability to do all of this is really because I have a great team.”

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"Why should a Williams student take advantage of getting outside of the Purple Bubble?"

While reading about ideas, events and people from other places is great, actually going to the place where these ideas originated will give you a completely new understanding of the point of view of the people and their cognitive background, which is inherently linked to a certain set of cultural values in the society in which they were raised.

No matter how well a given reading is written, nothing can replace going and experiencing a given culture. I think it will make a lot of things clearer that simply cannot be communicated through text.
Want to write/draw/interview on issues about social change and justice?

Submit to insight

Next content deadline: November 2
insightwilliams@gmail.com

Coming in November ...

**NOV. 1**
First Film Screening: “Gun Hill Road”

**NOV. 6**
Brown Bag Lunch with Professor of Art C. Ondine Chavoya

**NOV. 8**
“Papres” screening at Images

**NOV. 9**
Keynote Speaker Juliet Hooker

**NOV. 12**
Brown Bag Lunch with James O’Brian

**NOV. 15**
Film Screening: “Miss Bala”

**NOV. 16**
Activist Panel Discussion

**NOV. 17**
Dance Showcase

**NOV. 27**
Brown Bag Lunch with Professor of Latino/a Studies Maria Elena Cepeda

**NOV. 28**
Latino Heritage Month Dinner