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Photo by
Alexandra Retter
Leon Dixon is the first vice president for inclusion and human dignity at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. He hopes to collaborate with students and faculty on fostering a campus environment in which all feel comfortable and valued.

'A critical hire' — SMU's first VP of inclusion

(8/4/2021)

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

The job seemed too good to be true when Leon Dixon first saw the posting. After engaging in diversity and inclusion work for over 30 years, Dixon learned about the new inclusivity leadership position at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (SMU) and thought it hit at the heart of what he wants to accomplish: affirming people's dignity. "As a matter of fact, I almost got afraid to apply, because I was like, 'This is too perfect.' Because how often do you get to see something come up that is really at the core of what you do?" he said.

Dixon has now served as SMU's first vice president for inclusion and human dignity for about two months. He has enjoyed getting to know his colleagues and familiarizing himself with what it is like to live in Minnesota. He is also eager to begin collaborating with students once the fall semester starts later this month.

SMU established the position as part of its long-term strategic plan. The university also developed the position in response to student concerns about inclusivity on campus. Students voiced those worries at several protests during which they urged the university to create the role. At the end of 2019, students rallied in support of creating a more welcoming environment at SMU for members of the LGBTQ community. Students also urged the university this spring to more strongly denounce the actions of alum Kimberly Potter, the former police officer charged in the death of Daunte Wright.

"It's a critical hire for us," Provost and Dean of Faculties Brian Schmisek said. He continued, "I think it's important for us to have a point of contact where these issues can be addressed and heard," noting that Dixon will be that contact. "Our students want us to advance on this issue, and our faculty also want us to advance. It's a team effort."

Student Senate President Elijah Williams said he was very excited when he heard the position had been filled, and he feels it is a step in the right direction. "It had been something that was needed, I think, for a while," he said.

Dixon brings a wide array of experiences to the role. He is a U.S. Army veteran who served as an infantry soldier. "And even though we're known to be the combat force, it's also a certain level of compassion you learn through being in the infantry. Because mortality is real. But respect for others is real, too," he said. "That shapes a lot about who I am." He has also worked in the automotive, chemical, government, church, K-12, higher education and community organizing sectors. Helping groups manage change is a common link between all the positions he has held, Dixon said. "And part of dealing with change is always caring about people ... And I start from that perspective," he said.

One of Dixon's priorities is working with students. He plans to be out and about on campus when the school year begins so he can simply talk with them as they go from class to class. He also plans to go before the student senate and meet with the groups associated with the student governing body. Dixon has met with the student senate president and vice president this summer and set up standing meetings with them.

"He is a very down-to-earth individual, and he wants to help," Williams said of Dixon. "And I very much appreciate that, and I know it's going to help us as a university and help the students in the long run. And that's something I'm very excited for."

"He's a listener, and he wants to engage students especially and hear their experience," Schmisek said.

Dixon wants students to come to him with their concerns and views them doing so as a sign of a healthy campus atmosphere. "I'm a big proponent of collaboration ... There's something to be said for experience/wisdom, and there's something to be said for passion and expectation. So when we can put those two together, I'm pretty sure we can come up with something that really matters and is unique to us," he said.

Working with faculty is another substantial part of Dixon's role. Before the fall semester begins, Dixon will speak with faculty members at their convocation to describe the inclusivity concepts he will cover with them this academic year. He will then talk with them several times throughout the semester and continue the work next year. "Because this is something that is going to carry on," he said. "Because again [diversity, equity, inclusion] stuff usually lends itself to checking boxes. But when you start talking about the humanity and the dignity of that human person, you can't just check a box."

As Dixon works, he aspires for the SMU community to become like a family whose members trust one another so vulnerable conversations about what upsets and bothers them can happen more easily. He would like people to know it is all right to make a mistake while having those discussions. "It's okay to be a little uncomfortable. It's even okay to stumble," he said. "Because those are all points for us to grow from."

Dixon also wants people to feel comfortable and valued on campus so they are best able to learn. People asking him if there is anything they can help him with as he adjusts to moving to the area and taking on a new job has been very meaningful, for example, he said. "And I want to be able to show that to our students, because they're taking a huge leap, some of them," he said, noting that some come from out of state.

When students graduate, Dixon would like them to be able to say, "They really did live up to the promise. They really did want me here. I can't wait to come back."

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