

# 'We are all similar in a basic level'

**BUTLER COUNTY** – Kortet Mensah has been regional director of diversity and multicultural services at Miami University (Hamilton and Miami University Middletown) for about four months, and in that time, she has taken her message to the classrooms.

Since the branch campuses are full of non-traditional students – those unable to attend diverse events in the evenings because of other responsibilities – Mensah delivers her message during the day when she has “a captive audience.” She has met with students and staff at the two branch campuses to discuss diversity and how it impacts their lives. She has spoken to about 50 classes and held seven training sessions for staff and faculty.

Before coming to Butler County, Mensah worked in the psychology department



Kortet Mensah worked in the psychology department at DeVry University in Chicago. CONTRIBUTED

ment at DeVry University in Chicago, at the University of Illinois Chicago and in the Chicago Public Schools District.

**Q: When you think of the word diversity, what comes to mind?**

**A:** Variety and unity among variety. Diversity includes markers that make us distinctly unique, yet similar. That cuts across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, the typical things that come to mind when people think of diversity. But coming from a psychological background, I expand that to include nationality, language, age, child bearing status, marital status, religion, spirituality, perspectives that are influenced by all of that. It's essential that we look across at all of these markers ... Regardless of the diversity markers we represent, we are all similar in a basic level.

**Q: What do you consider your role at the universities?**

**A:** Create a welcoming environment in the center ... And we do specific programming around the different markers of diversity to educate and engage the campus and local communities about diversity related issues. Again celebrating the strengths of the different diversity groups and addressing the challenges and figuring out how to address those challenges.

**Q: As a society, are we doing enough to open the doors to students interested in attending college?**

**A:** That's a big one. I don't know if the word is “enough” because education is a two-fold process. It's a social service yet it has a business component to it. We can always do more in terms of making sure we connect with kindergarten through 12, creating pipelines to make sure students are adequately prepared, or at least exposed to what's needed for success. From the business perspective, that's where the trick comes in. Because from one perspective, students are entering into a business relationship. Making sure we explain to them what that relationship entails, what are their expectations and responsibilities and what things we are hoping to impart in that relationship. There are steps to the process. But to be honest, because of the economy problems we are having, we need to do more.

**Q: How can you tell if you're doing a good job?**

**A:** Depends on the day. When students or faculty members come to me and says, “Dr. Mensah, I came to one of the events and it opened my eyes. I never thought of diversity in that way before.”

**Q: Why are some people afraid of diversity?**

**A:** Diversity conjures up scarcity, accusations, blame, shame, fighting. Quite a bit of our students say, “Sometimes I feel like I'm going to be put on the defensive. Sometimes I feel like the finger is going to be pointed at me and my people.” Rather than

OK it's our people and we are part of a human race. As a human race, regardless of what continent you came from, we have histories of supporting each other and histories of mistreating each other. As a human race, we have some work to do.

**Q: With every new generation raised, is racial discrimination diminishing more and more, or still very present?**

**A:** We are making progress. We got a ways to go. If all you do is look at what's wrong and never take stock in what's right, you leave yourself in a hopeless, helpless, depressive state and that's no good for us trying to move forward. We have a lot more to do. Civil rights now includes beyond race, class, gender, sexual orientation. We are extending to religion, lifestyle choices.

**Q: What are your thoughts on this being the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.**

**A:** We are moving, but some would argue at a snail's pace. It's different now than it was 50 years ago so that means progress.