

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, Tim chats with the co-chair of University of Maine's Diversity Equity and Inclusion Council.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. Through this podcast, we hope to break down barriers, embrace diversity, and focus on issues of racial, social, and medical justice. We want to listen and learn by tapping into the many voices of diversity that we have across our health system in our great state of Maine. This podcast provides a forum for our listeners to share an experience of growth toward a culture that cares for one another. Our goal is to create a shared understanding of the issues that exist and find a better path forward.

Tim Dentry:

Our guest today is Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead. Dr. Whitehead is vice president and chief of staff at the University of Maine, the state's flagship public research university. At UMaine, Dr. Whitehead is engaged in a variety of strategic initiatives, including co-chairing the President's Council on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, leading UMaine's APLU Powered by Publics initiative, and serving as the project director for the recently announced UMS Transform project. Dr. Whitehead, thank you for joining me today.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

Thank you for having me, Tim. I'm really honored to be here.

Tim Dentry:

Last week when we spoke, we ended on a first name basis. So please call me Tim. And may I continue to call you Kimberly?

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

Absolutely you can.

Tim Dentry:

Wonderful. Thank you. When we had our get to know each other call last week, you described the amazing and thorough work done by UMaine, including your Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council, the nine areas of advocacy, and the many recommendations for action that came out of this initiative, including your annual report. And thank you for sending me all that material. I've read it. We're going to share it with our DEI council here and see what we can borrow. We at Northern Light are on a similar journey, and I know we can learn a lot from the UMaine experience. Would you please share an overarching perspective of the work that UMaine is undertaking right now?

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

Sure. Thank you for that question. I want to talk a little bit about the President's Council on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, which is a group of 33 allies, advocates, champions from the University of Maine and our regional campus, the University of Maine at Machias. And so back in the summer, the president appointed this council to look at four areas. We have a four-point charge. The first part is to look at structural impediments to diversity, equity and inclusion. So what are the areas of systemic racism and other structural impediments to DEI at UMaine and UMaine Machias?

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

Our second part of our charge was to look at visions and operations integration. So what are the major university planning documents and processes, including our strategic visions and values framework are defined tomorrow initiatives? Are they sufficiently focused on the values of diversity, equity and inclusion? Also, looking at data and measurement. What data should the university be collecting and reviewing to guide our work? And lastly, alignment and resourced. Is our current portfolio of committees, offices, organizations, and activities designed to promote diversity, equity and inclusion? So as you can see, it was a huge charge for us. And so we decided as a committee to tackle a part of that charge and we focused on structural impediments. Alongside that, we're also looking at the data and measurement piece.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

And I want to talk a little bit first about the areas of advocacy. So we settled on nine areas of advocacy for our work that came from a previous report that was generated at the institution by my colleague, Dr. Robert Dana, on diversity and inclusion at UMaine. And he focused on eight areas there. And so we decided to add one. And so our areas are race, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. And so I will just say from a very personal perspective that this has been a great opportunity for me to collaborate with some very talented faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community partners who are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion at both UMaine and UMaine Machias, and who have worked diligently to provide or generate this report that you were able to read our findings or recommendations.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

As a part of that, we had 45 recommendations that focused on structural impediments, and we released that report on January the 18th. And so this is just an initial phase of our work because we have a lot more work to do, but we are very pleased with the product that we were able to generate in just three short months of focused collaborative meetings, utilizing the diversity of thought, perspective experiences that the members of the committee were able to bring to the conversation.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

And so I just want to add that the other piece of our work... And I want to just mention our co-chair is Dr. Susan McKay, who is the founding director of the Maine Center for Research in STEM Education and professor of physics. So she brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to this collaboration. And so we have been kind of pitching our report, socializing it among different campus leaders at UMaine and UMaine Machias, and it has been well received and we've received a lot of report and we look forward to the implementation of those recommendations that are included.

Tim Dentry:

That is fabulous. And I really love the connection that you have with values. I think that's one thing that I've really learned from listening to you and reading the content. I'm going to talk with our DEI council as well, I think, connecting it with values and that's really important, plus the measurements and resourcing you're so right. Everyone that we've worked with here at Northern Light that is part of this whole effort, this whole initiative, is very well meaning and we're learning and we're growing and we have a lot of doers as well. But how do you make sure we resource that so it's not just a one off, but it's who we are and what we do, and we back up our words with actual steps and tangible actions? I think that's something we can learn from your effort, for sure.

Tim Dentry:

I know that DEI, diversity, equity and inclusion has become a commonplace term, an acronym, but I do sometimes worry that the passion, depth and higher calling that started this initiative, not just here in Northern Light, but across our country, might become... I'm making up term, but corporately normalized. And by that, I mean, it will become the area of focus of a committee with an annual work plan. And then we may grow ourselves into thinking that it's just another initiative or we've done it all. Which of course, we're only just beginning this journey.

Tim Dentry:

When I first started as CEO of Northern in Light, that I've been in this position, I decided to make this a key part of our pursuit of a culture of caring for one another. And what motivated me the most at that time, still does, frankly, is racial, social and medical justice. And when you and I spoke last week, we talked about the integration of those three aspects of justice. It started here again, it was only in my second month or so. The pandemic was, obviously just like it is today here in February 2021, it was a big deal in all consuming, but then the George Floyd killing happened and we realized we have to be more than just focused on putting out a virus. We've got to make sure that if we are saying we care about our staff, that we find out, are there things that we need to learn from our colleagues, our 12,500 colleagues? That terrible incident, that terrible killing could help us learn. So thus the racial part of it was right up front when we started this.

Tim Dentry:

And then we also surveyed all of our staff. It was a great survey that our human resource leaders across Northern Light put out there for all of our staff. And one thing that came back was also very much a concern for just as you name the nine areas of advocacy, there are other groups that wanted be listened to that felt that they were invisible, that felt hurt through microaggressions, or what have you, the LGBTQ+ community, et cetera. So thus social justice.

Tim Dentry:

And then of course, with COVID bringing on what it brought, the acknowledgement as we started to see trends and the data started to come in and realized, wait a minute, why is it that people of color have double or triple the incidents of infection rates and death rates and that kind of a thing. And then as we get into vaccines, how are we going to make sure that that is something that is equitably accessible to individuals of high risk and people of color? And so the medical disparities. And we are already beginning to plan for life after COVID where, what are the kinds of things, the social determinants of health, where we could be a more responsive healthcare system and reach out better to individuals of all walks of what life, especially if we had more of a sensitivity to where there are medical injustices going on? So in other words, they're all connected. That's a big wind up in the pitch of my question, but how would you describe the UMaine experience of integrating those three pillars of justice?

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

Well, actually, I'm going to answer that question from a broader experience or a broader perspective than the UMaine perspective. I think COVID is a very good example of looking at that, as you mentioned, because this pandemic has actually forced us to look at those three pillars and their interconnectedness, especially if we want to achieve parity. Let's say for example, when we talk about vaccine distributions, we look at how the racial background, health status, and our quest for social justice and equity come into play in terms of that distribution. I've been watching the news as we discussed last week, and what

I'm seeing is that even in those communities that are largely composed of people of color, the distribution or the percentage of people who are actually able to get the vaccine is very low. So we have to take all of those things into context to make sure that we are able to provide equity and parity, and that we treat the human condition by keeping those three pillars at the forefront of our minds.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

I'll just kind of give a personal example of what I'm saying. I'm an African American, I'm also a woman, but I'm also an individual that suffers from chronic illnesses. So if you just take into account one portion of who I am, just the female part, then you kind of miss the taking a deeper dive. I'm an African American, but I also have a compromised health status. And so if you look at those things interconnectedly, the treatment or the parity or the equity that I'm receiving may be very different if you only take one part of who I am into that context. So if you only look at me being a woman or being an African American woman or not even considering my health status. So I think looking at the interconnectedness of health status, that medical justice part, the socioeconomic status, that social justice part, as well as looking at racial justice, all of those parts are important.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

And so, like I said last week, I applaud you for not just looking at one facet of justice, but bringing those three important facets together in the work that you're doing here in Northern Light.

Tim Dentry:

That's a beautiful example. I think all of our listeners can really identify with the way that you put that in personal terms. I thank you so much for that, Kimberly. I'd like to return the favor. Do you have a question for me?

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

I sure do. As I was thinking about the podcast and the work that you're doing, my question is what is the most valuable lesson that you have learned from hosting this podcast?

Tim Dentry:

That's a great question. And to our listening audience, I will admit, I had some time to think about this, because I saw the question at a time. So I really appreciate that. And I thought a lot about this and what a great question. I have a twofold answer.

Tim Dentry:

One is me personally. So what's my most personal valuable lesson? It really is that the power of learning and growing is I think at least 10 times greater, probably 100 times greater than through listening than talking. I'll say it again. The power of learning and growing is 10 times greater through listening than through talking. That's number one. That's kind of the way that I'm built, but through this process, wow. I have learned one thing from what I said, but I've learned a lot from... You are the 18th individual that's been here with us and I'm very, very proud of that. Not even reached my first year as CEO of Northern Light Health and starting this in month two or so. And to be able to learn from so many great people and listen is very humbling. That's number one. It's better to listen than to talk.

Tim Dentry:

The second point is that my primary target audience is the Northern Light family. And I consider the Northern Light family, our 12,500 staff and their families. That's a lot of people. And the feedback... The most valuable lesson's what you asked me. The feedback that I've gotten from the Northern Light family also has been very enriching. And I feel that a lot of people have had the opportunity, they said, it's tough to feel invisible and they feel less invisible. Or this really is a culture in this organization that cares.

Tim Dentry:

I was just with a group from one of our hospitals and they were the leadership group of one of our hospitals that's been hit hard by COVID over the last couple months. So again, this is February, we started our climb of real COVID infections in our facilities and among our staff and those kinds of things, not even two months ago, about two months ago. And the prior eight or nine months was getting ready, getting ready, getting ready. And so they're coming up on the one-year anniversary of this and people are feeling it. They're feeling what that is. The emotions of that and the drain of that and the stress of that. I asked them as I was listening to their experiences and what they're dealing with and how they're trying to help people and how they're trying to work together. I said, "What else would you like to share with me?"

Tim Dentry:

And one individual, one of our great leaders said, "What we are doing in the area of appreciation for making sure that we stand for a culture of caring for one another. And that we have as a part of that, racial, social and medical justice. And we have as a part of that, things like podcasts and other ways to listen to each other, to make sure that people know that we care, that we're in this together, that we're going to address our microaggressions or other biases. We're going to be what we want a family to be." And that that has made them stronger. And that that has helped them get through this tough time.

Tim Dentry:

The other thing is, again, I mentioned the survey, but when we asked our staff... We asked them this question, "Does Northern Light have a social and moral obligation to be a statewide leader in building a future where social justice and health equity reign?" I was very curious about how our entire workforce would answer that anonymously and I wasn't so sure how we would... 84% believe that Northern Light has a social or moral obligation to be a statewide leader in building a future where social justice and health equity reign. That to me says we're on the right path here. That to me says that it's giving people a different source of strength by feeling that they're in an organization that really does care, and it's getting us through COVID, and it'll get us into our even brighter future.

Tim Dentry:

So that's my most valuable lesson, is that as I started this podcast series, some folks weren't so sure we should be dedicating that kind of time. We should be doing other things to put out COVID and that kind of thing. My most valuable lesson is investing in listening and your people. And these kinds of ways of connecting is priceless.

Tim Dentry:

Kimberly, thank you for joining me in this very meaningful discussion.

Dr. Kimberly D. Whitehead:

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Thank you so much for inviting me here to talk about the work that we're doing at the University of Maine and University of Maine at Machias. I've really enjoyed our conversation and as community partners, I look forward to the work that you're doing here to hear more about that as you progress.

Tim Dentry:

Absolutely. We're in this together. Thank you. And that will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Thank you to you, our podcast listeners also. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity and inclusion for one another. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to learn more about the University of Maine's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council, please visit our website. We welcome you to join us next on March 4th. We will be talking with Dr. James Fullwood, and we'll be discussing the history of racism and segregation in the medical profession.