Ohio minority affairs expert named head of AU’s Multicultural Center

Ohio-based minority affairs authority Shakeer Abdullah has been appointed director of the Multicultural Center in AU’s Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs, effective July 1.

Abdullah comes to Auburn from his position as director of multicultural affairs at Capital University Law School in Columbus, Ohio, where he recruited and counseled prospective students and implemented diversity and service learning programs for all students.

Previously, he was the coordinator of new diversity initiatives in the Multicultural Center at Ohio State University. He was responsible for planning and coordinating initiatives that supported diverse student populations, including Appalachian Region students, students with disabilities, Middle Eastern students, multiracial students and veterans.

He has also served as director of minority recruitment at Wittenberg University in Ohio. Abdullah holds a bachelor’s degree in business management from Wittenberg University and a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs from Ohio State.

With diversity identified as a core value of Auburn, the Multicultural Center is one of several major programs and centers that the AU Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs coordinates, directs or assists as part of its vision to foster and sustain a campus environment that promotes academic excellence, respects differences and accepts inclusiveness.

“The Multicultural Center is important to Auburn University’s efforts in creating and nourishing a culturally diverse community,” said Overtoun Jenda, associate provost for diversity and multicultural affairs.

Among its programs, the center supports activities to help underrepresented American and international students feel at home on campus. Housed in Foy Student Union, the center serves as a hub for cultural and ethnic student organizations and as a resource center for faculty, staff and the community.

“Shakeer Abdullah has been very successful with initiatives to promote diversity at institutions in Ohio, and we look forward to the leadership and ideas he will bring to this effort,” Jenda said.
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25 years at AU
Professor endows scholarship for journalism majors

Journalism Professor Ed Williams has marked his 25th year at the Auburn faculty by endowing a scholarship for students in the program. Williams continues to teach in the Department of Communication and Journalism after stepping down as faculty adviser to the Auburn Plainsman student newspaper after 25 years in that role. “My students tell me that I’ve impacted their lives, but I wanted to leave another kind of legacy, something that will be here long after I am gone,” said Williams. “I felt that funding an endowed scholarship is something that will be a part of Auburn forever and something that demonstrates the commitment that I’ve had to my students and to the Auburn Plainsman for the past 25 years.”

The endowment will provide scholarships for students who have demonstrated a commitment to journalism through working at the Plainsman. Williams joined the AU faculty in 1983 after several years of writing for newspapers in Alabama, including the Mobile Register, the South Alabamaian, the Brewton Standard and the Andalusia Star-News.

During Williams’ 23 years as adviser, the Plainsman was awarded 13 of its 23 Pacemaker Awards, the highest honor awarded in college journalism. One of the Plainsman’s accolades was writing the Daily Texan at the University of Texas, where he has received more Pacemakers than The Plainsman.

“I’ve had the perfect job,” said Williams. “But I felt it was time for new leadership as the adviser, and I want to continue on classroom teaching and advising students in our internship program. It’s been a fun ride – I wouldn’t take anything for my association with student journalists at the Plainsman.”

Besides teaching, Williams will continue to serve as journalism internship director.

Auburn staff member assumes chair of certification board for coalition of public relations organizations

Michael Tullier, director of external relations for the AU College of Education, has been appointed 2008 chair of the Universal Accreditation Board, a certification body for the public relations profession.

Established in 1998 by a coalition of public relations organizations, the board administers the professional certification process for members as Accredited in Public Relations, also known as APR. Tullier belongs to two UAB participating organizations: the Public Relations Society of America and the Southern Public Relations Federation.

As chair, Tullier will oversee board activities as they relate to managing the credential and board functions that include marketing and Web communications, research, exam management, candidate support and board administration. The board includes 30 public relations professionals and one full-time staff from the nine organizations that comprise the UAB.

Tullier worked in public relations positions at nonprofit organizations in Louisiana and Alabama before coming to AU in 2001. He earned a bachelor’s degree in mass communication at LSU in 1994 and a master’s in public administration from Auburn in 1998.

AU students apply green, recycling concepts for Salvation Army facility

With the May 22 dedication of a new retail store on Opelika Road for the Salvation Army, Auburn-Alabamians residents saw the results of teamwork between AU’s College of Architecture, Design and Construction and local architects and builders involving some of the latest concepts in environmentally friendly design and construction.

“A team of six students from the college’s Design-Build master’s program worked with John Randall Wilson Architects and J&L Contracting in an outreach project to incorporate concepts the college is developing in its academic programs,” said Angela Box, new facility includes office, retail and warehouse space. “D.R. Ruth, director of the college’s Design-Build program, said integrating alternative practices, sustainability and “green” design was a priority in construction of the new store.

In addition to drawing upon natural light and air for the facility, the buildings found a use for old shipping containers in the structure. Design team members said use of such materials provides a socially responsible answer for one of the “leftovers” of today’s society, while providing a resource for one of the building’s main load-bearing system. Members said reuse of materials helps convey the spirit of the Salvation Army, which resells donated clothing and household goods at low cost to consumers.

“Equally important is the opportunity to experiment with using alternative and environmentally sustainable building materials, and therefore set an example for others to follow,” Bennett added, “It is also important that the students worked collaboratively with professionals from both the design and construction fields, thus providing them with hands-on examples of the work they will be engaged in after graduation.”

Updated Aug. 1 deadline set for researchers to obtain training, certification for studies of humans

Effective Aug. 1, new federal guidelines require researchers at AU and other institutions to obtain federally sanctioned training and certification in human subject research before they can initiate new studies or modify existing ones.

The federal requirement also applies to department heads and faculty advisers. Auburn’s Institutional Review Board is helping faculty comply with the requirement through a Web-based training program known as CITI, which is available (www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/resources.html). For more information, call 844-5966.
AU researcher’s animal studies create stir in science magazines

Research by an AU doctoral student is drawing connections in science magazines to Kevin Bacon, the Hollywood actor whose name has become synonymous in the popular culture with social networks among celebrities.

However, Theo Manno, a doctoral candidate in biological sciences, has found three degrees of separation, on average, not six, among his subjects, none of which are the famous actor, and none of which are American or even human. Yet Manno’s research on free-ranging, wild Columbian ground squirrels in Alberta, Canada, found some parallels with human social activity.

The research findings, recently published in the journal Animal Behavior and featured in the magazines Discovery News and New Scientist, also could have implications for social policy affecting management of natural resources.

Expanding upon studies by Stephen Dobson, a professor in the College of Sciences and Mathematics at AU, Manno and two assistants — including AU education master’s student Lili DeBarbieri — observed the interaction of a colony of 65 ground squirrels in a nature park in the western Canada province from April-July 2006 and ran the results through a computer model. The model ran on software known as UCINET, which has been used by scientists in a variety of disciplines to identify networks on the Internet and among airline hubs as well as social connections among animals and even among humans.

The computer analysis identified two communities that were further divided into two and four subgroups, respectively.

Using a wilderness research site Dobson has used for more than a decade, Manno confirmed that ground squirrels are social animals and found that their social groups have some of the same characteristics as those of humans. For instance, the colony’s extroverts are so friendly with members of their groups that the larger, most structured social networks form around them. He also noted groups accepted outsiders in their midst if the outsiders were friendly with a member of the group.

As expected, the social groups are at their strongest during the mating period, and Manno confirmed that dynamics of the groups change over time, with females having less social contact even with other females after giving birth. Yet, the groups maintain their cohesion as long as the most socially active individuals remain in their midst.

Although mating behavior figured prominently in relationships between males and females, individuals were amicable with members of the same gender when mating was not the primary factor of group dynamics, Manno observed.

He defined amicable, “friendly” interactions as instances in which ground squirrels “kissed,” sniffed, played together or groomed one another.

While the socially active animals grouped themselves into networks with each other, Manno found that squirrels that were less socially active formed their own, smaller networks. “It is a lot like high school,” Manno said, noting the first networks that most Americans encounter outside the family.

To tell the individuals apart, the researchers trapped, marked and released each squirrel at the start of the project. To avoid further contact with the animals, the researchers would climb aboard a platform five feet above the forest floor each morning before the ground squirrels left their burrows and would climb down each day after the squirrels retreated to their nests for the night.

Manno, who earned his bachelor’s degree from Rider University in New Jersey, is on course to receive a doctorate from AU in August. After he earns his doctorate, he will head to the Southwest, where, before coming to Auburn, he worked as an assistant to University of Maryland researcher John Hoogland in studies of the social behavior of prairie dogs.

Some of the techniques learned in that work carried over to his studies at Auburn, Manno said.

The AU researcher said similarities can be found between the animal networks and networks of all types, not just humans. Since many animals form social groups, the research could have implications for public policy regarding wildlife. For instance, in computer simulations he removed certain individuals of the colony. When those individuals were selected at random, their removal had little impact on the cohesiveness of the networks until the removal exceeded 10 percent. Yet when the group leaders were removed, he found that the networks deteriorated.

Wildlife management authorities could use the results to prevent the spread of disease in an animal population, Manno said, by identifying and removing the central figures in a colony. As the group breaks apart, the remaining individuals would have less contact with one another, thus reducing their risk of infection.

Dobson, himself an internationally prominent authority on behavioral ecology, said Manno’s research is a significant advance in the biological sciences. “I consider Theo’s work as critical to understanding the general principles that govern social life in simpler rodent societies and have extensions to our own social evolution,” Dobson said.