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UMaine's first equal opportunity director to receive honorary degree

April 21, 2022

The University of Maine will award an honorary doctorate to JoAnn Fritsche, UMaine's first director of equal opportunity and also director of the Women's Development Program, whose vision and leadership transformed the university's curricula to be more inclusive, and led to the creation of a women's studies program.

Fritsche, of University Place, Washington, a longtime educator and advocate for persons with disabilities and their families, will receive the honorary degree during the afternoon ceremony of UMaine's 220th commencement on May 7.

Fritsche understood that advancing equity and diversity required important changes in practice, such as equal salary, more diverse job candidates, accessible buildings and classrooms, and equitable treatment of and facilities for women student-athletes, as well as a change in culture.

Her initiatives were catalysts for cultural changes that still benefit UMaine, including a curriculum that incorporates the knowledge and experience of underrepresented people into courses and in all fields, noted the inaugural Nine Pillars of Diversity Lectures Series on "A Legacy of Advocacy: A Reflection on the History of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Maine." The 2021 lecture, which focused on Fritsche's advocacy and paralegal work at the university, was sponsored by the President's Council on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

"JoAnn Fritsche envisioned a curriculum that would, as she noted, help prepare all students for a world in which 'the needs, contributions and ethical claims of women, people of color and developing nations must be acknowledged, not merely to ensure equity, but also to ensure peace and human survival.' Her leadership and vision are as important today as they were decades ago," says UMaine President Joan Ferrini-Mundy.

Fritsche began her professional career in December 1972 at UMaine, where she was named the first equal opportunity director, to advise the university's administrators and faculty about how to comply with Titles VI and Titles VII of the Civil Rights Act, as well as of Title IX of the Education Amendments, passed by Congress in 1972. After the Rehabilitation Act was amended in 1973, she also assumed responsibilities for helping to ensure that the university would become compliant with Sections 503 and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended, to support employees and students with disabilities. She was a cooperating associate professor of English.

As an administrator with interest and experience in ways to facilitate institutional change, Fritsche focused on curriculum development, advancing an Interdisciplinary approach to studying women and the social construction of gender, and developing strategies for the inclusion of women's experiences and perspectives in the educational process.

With financial support from then President Paul Silverman, Fritsche led an initiative to achieve a more gender- and racially balanced curricula at UMaine. The goal was curricula transformation in light of scholarship and perspectives of women, as well as men, of diverse racial, ethnic, national and class backgrounds. This work led to the introduction of new scholarship by and about women, and, ultimately, to the founding of the Women in the Curriculum (WIC) program in 1982. WIC established a planning committee for a women's studies program at UMaine, now the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

In addition, with a grant from the United States Department of Education, Fritsche launched a Leadership in Educational Equity Project to provide faculty at UMaine and seven other cooperating institutions in northern New England with the technical and financial resources to incorporate the contributions and perspectives of women in academic courses and research. The work of the project is reflected in Fritsche's 1985 book, "Toward Excellence Equity: The Scholarship on Women as a Catalyst for Change in the University."

Fritsche also established the Women's Development Project to reflect the "university's recognition and support of women's efforts in economic and human development." In its first year the Development Project sponsored a "series of seminars for women in transition," conducted a study of women in the curriculum, and started planning a speakers bureau. The following year, Fritsche focused on women beyond the university, creating two women's development directories — one for greater Bangor and the other statewide. The directories included businesses and services run by women, agencies that addressed women's special needs, and individuals who had skills to share.

From UMaine, Fritsche moved to the West Coast in 1986 to begin a career in fundraising and volunteer consulting for nonprofits. Her interests focus on "helping individuals living with neurological, sensory, physical, cognitive and mental disAbilities, plus assisting their loved ones who want to learn how to support the individual and her or his aspirations while also creating time and social support for themselves."

Since 2020, Fritsche has served on the board of directors of the Center for Independence, which promotes service, advocacy and community by people with disabilities, for people with disabilities. For nine years with the Tacoma Area Commission on Disabilities, she held multiple leadership roles as a board member and volunteer. From 1999–2002, Fritsche was executive director of the Washington Coalition of Citizens with disAbilities, serving the Greater Seattle area.

Fritsche received a 1988 Maryann Hartman Award. She holds a Ph.D. in English language and literature/letters from Case Western Reserve University.

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