Nomination for Dean’s Diversity Award

Omar H. Ali, Ph.D.
Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Nomination Statement

Collectively, we, a group of students, faculty, staff and administrators at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and members of the surrounding community, submit this nomination of Dr. Omar H. Ali, Professor of African American Diaspora Studies, for the College of Arts and Sciences Diversity Award. Through his selflessness and his ceaseless activity as an organizer, a leader, a friend, a colleague, and a teacher, moment by moment, he supports the development of all who are lucky enough to know him. For many of us, Professor Ali has not just made a difference in our lives, it has made the difference. You will hear this most eloquently in the words of those who need Professor Ali most, young people who, through his influence, have become empowered to create change in their own lives and who have become agents of change themselves.

He encouraged me to take on roles that I never seem myself doing before. My entire attitude about life has changed since I met Dr. Ali. ... He has given me so much inspiration in my life. He has encouraged me to grow and to keep growing, and plays a prominent role in why I am taking the steps to become an educator now.

-- Aliyah Ruffin, Graduate Student in Education, NCA&T

Dr. Ali supported me in navigating the emotional and institutional challenges of higher education... he gave me tools to not only empower myself but to support other men and women of color, particularly first-generation students.

-- Domonique Edwards, PhD Student, UNCG

He teaches with energy, excitement, and compassion. He has an almost mythical ability to create an environment that is welcoming to people of all backgrounds. Through his playfulness, his absolute belief in the ability of others, and his wonderful listening skills, Dr. Ali masterfully helps you paint your aspirations onto you as if you were a canvas that with some shine could be something as beautiful as The Starry Night.

-- Omar Obregon-Cuecas, Student, UNCG Honors Program

The call for nominations requests “A statement … describing the activity and how it fits the College’s Diversity Initiatives Mission.” Professor Ali’s contributions are a web of activities through which diversity and inclusiveness are the common threads. They include establishment of organizations such as Spectrum, UNCG (a group for young people on the autism spectrum), the Muslim Student Association, Community Play! (which supports people in poor and working-class communities), and Bridging the Gap (a project that builds relationships between students and police officers on the UNCG campus). Professor Ali contributes tirelessly to initiatives in our community, for example the Crossroads program for high school students in a psychiatric hospital, and the inaugural Diversity Symposium with the US District Court. The impact of these activities is profound, unprecedented, and revolutionary. If ever there was a question that one person can change the world, here is the evidence. Read on.
UNCG Administrator & Faculty Letters of Support for Dr. Omar Ali Nomination for Dean’s Diversity Award

Included in This Section:

- Rebecca Muich, Assistant Dean, Lloyd International Honors College
- Terri Shelton, Vice Chancellor of Research
- Joseph Green, Executive Director Retention, Progression, & Completion and Student Success Center
- Sarah Dreier-Kasik, Learning and Development Coordinator, UNCG Human Resources
- Yaseline Muñoz, Lead Coordinator, Mi Placita Latinx Coalition
- Alyssa Gabbay, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies
- Nadja Cech, Patricia A. Sullivan Distinguished Professor of Chemistry
Dear Review Committee,

It's my pleasure to write in support of Omar Ali's nomination for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences. I have known Omar for roughly two and a half years, since he first came on as Interim Dean of Lloyd International Honors College, and then later was appointed to the position full time. In reading the areas of interest for this award, it occurs to me that you simply will not find a better candidate than Omar on this campus. In the time that I have spent working for and with Omar, I have been continually impressed and amazed with the scope of his vision for creating inclusive environments – from the very basics of his day-to-day communications with his ensemble (or staff), to the time he spends working for international organizations, Omar has a way of making communication seem easy, pleasurable, and meaningful. While his facility with this kind of work appears effortless, it’s really the result of his deep-seated conviction that bringing as many voices to the table and then really listening is the only way to bridge across differences and move (the conversation, the project, the problem, the stalemate, the party) forward. I’m happy to highlight here just a few of the ways Omar’s dedication to true inclusivity has impacted the students and the staff of the Honors College, our campus community, and our local community as well.

One of the most visible ways Omar creates inclusive and diverse environments for our students is by recruiting faculty from across the university to teach classes about underrepresented or otherwise diverse communities for our International Honors program. Omar challenges our (mostly white, female) International Honors students to deeply engage with cultural traditions they likely know very little about. Courses like “Performing Blackness in Brazil,” “Race and the Urban City,” and “Exile and Return in Arabic Literature” diversify our offerings in a way that not only shifts attention towards non-Western and non-canonical traditions and histories, but also encourages students to engage with materials in new ways. The Honors SLO Omar crafted demonstrates his dedication to pushing students to develop in beyond typical academic competencies: “Build critical oral communication skills using creative modes of learning that incorporate performance, improvisation, and play as part of developing social and emotional intelligence for greater global competency.” Omar also places great importance on instructor diversity as well. While visual diversity is important to him, Omar also seeks out contingent or adjunct faculty as well as full-time and tenure-lined faculty to teach for the Honors College. Naturally, the instructors benefit from teaching high ability students in small classes, but the students also learn more about who a college instructor is. As the academy, who has access to it, and how it is maintained continues to evolve, Omar has ensured that the Honors College recognizes that dedication to undergraduate learning can come from many places on campus and in the community.
Omar invests a considerable amount of his time and energy in teaching, mentoring, and advising students from underrepresented or minority communities. A particular example that really exemplifies Omar’s egalitarian and supportive attitude was his role in getting Spectrum, a club for UNCG students who identify as being on the autism spectrum, started. A student expressed an interest in developing and leading the club, and Omar offered his immediate and unwavering support, moving the notion from “wouldn’t it be nice if...” to “we meet on Mondays at 4” very quickly. When he sees a hole that needs to be filled, he doesn’t hesitate to dig in. Another great example is the work he did on the advisory board for the McNair Scholarship program. Once the proposal was made, Omar was all in, helping to recruit candidates, build the program, and co-create a class called “How Do We Know What We Know” in the Honors College to also help serve those students as they begin their path to graduate school. And to give just one more example of the ways he supports student development outside the classroom, I’d like to point out how Omar makes travel to major cities like New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C. possible for many students who have never been out of the state, on a plane, or to a major metropolitan area. Essentially, Omar can see both the big picture and the finer details when it comes to offering opportunities to students with diverse abilities and diverse backgrounds: he can help get the grand vision off the ground by throwing his support behind a major project, and he can help 5 or 6 or 12 students organize around an idea. To him, the projects are equally important, and equally deserving of his time.

Just as UNCG continues to put a strong focus on community engagement and regional transformation, Omar continues to connect our students to the UNCG and local communities in new ways. He encourages students, faculty, and staff to address issues of diversity with candor and compassion. One of Omar’s most meaningful initiatives for the Honors College was the creation of a community outreach position to help connect students with Warnersville community members through the Community Play! All Stars program, in which young Warnersville residents learn about the transformative power of improvisation and playfulness. These fun programs lay the foundation for teaching young students important interpersonal skills that they may not be learning as part of their classroom education, but that will give them a leg up as they come to consider attending a college or university. Omar has also brought teenagers from the Center for New North Carolinians community centers to campus for a mock class and a tour of Greensboro to encourage them to think of themselves as students who are college-bound after graduation. He also created a very important and very timely program called “Bridging the Gap,” in which minority students meet with members of UNCG’s Police Force to talk and play improvisation games. Using the playful atmosphere as a natural tension-reliever and ice-breaker, he has found a method of making meaningful conversations happen naturally, not in reaction to a crisis. By bringing the local community to campus and sending students to the local community, Omar supports the development of diverse populations in multiple ways for both short-term and long-term impacts.

Our own ensemble is essentially an experimental environment where Omar tests out and practices the inclusive techniques and behaviors that make him so effective within the UNCG community. Omar has shown dedication to recruiting and developing a diverse team: diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, educational background, and age. As a small unit, we work together very closely, and it’s refreshing to see how ideas bounced around a group of very different people begin
to change and grow. Omar’s favorite phrase is “What do you think?” and the expectation is that we all (student workers, budget and operations managers, grad assistants, advisors, assistant deans) will have a say and more importantly, should have a say. I learn from him every day how important it is to ask “What do you think?” and then shut up. It’s easy to lean on experience and position as drivers of decision-making, but Omar just thinks differently: we are a group, an ensemble, and everyone offers something to the performance. That kind of thinking led to the creation of an Alumni and Current Student Advisory Board to balance our Honors Council and continued professional development opportunities for the entire staff. Any dean or director can say that they support development by making money available for it; but few carve time out of weekly meetings for group readings and discussions. Omar believes in people and their capacity to stretch and grow, and he invests his confidence in the strength of diversity.

I think that Omar talks the talk and walks the walk when it comes to demonstrating commitment to diversity and inclusivity on campus. He can be seen on campus, around town, and on TV talking about how issues of race and identity will continue to impact our communities, which is important and very special. What I wish more people could see, though, is his calendar, and how he lives these principles every day, in his office, in his classroom, out of the spotlight. Everyone is welcome in his office and at his table, and everyone gets the special experience being asked “What do you think?” I cannot think of a better representative of what truly inclusive thinking looks like. If I can offer any other insights, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Muich, Ph.D.
Assistant Dean, Lloyd International Honors College
rmmuich@uncg.edu
January 21, 2018

RE: Letter of Support for the Nomination of Dr. Omar Ali

Dear Review Committee:

I am pleased to write this letter in support of Dr. Omar Ali’s nomination for the Diversity Award for the College of Arts and Sciences. I have had the privilege of working with and observing Omar across a wide range of initiatives and efforts since his arrival to UNCG and in looking at the criteria for this award, I think that Omar is most deserving.

First, a review of his cv reveals a rich and varied scholarship that provides theoretical support and a base of evidence toward understanding what diversity means in all its complexity and the value of diversity in multiple settings (e.g., private companies, voting, government, the cultural history of civilizations). But Omar’s contribution to diversity goes well beyond the important artifacts of his scholarship. He truly “walks the talk” in his interactions with students, faculty, and administrators across disciplines and units.

For Omar, diversity is just one guidepost, not a destination, along a journey toward creating and sustaining UNC Greensboro as an authentic inclusive community where all students, staff, and faculty feel valued and respected. His impact goes beyond a single committee assignment or one course, though he has increased diversity in both (e.g., the titles of the number of courses and seminars show a broad and longstanding contribution through curricula). Rather, because this is a value that permeates his vision, his commitment to inclusion and the value of respecting diverse viewpoints is evident in everything he does. It is simply a way of doing business.

Omar’s efforts are evident not only with high achieving students through his work in the Honors College but across the board with students of all levels of achievement and backgrounds. Through both formal and informal settings, I have seen Omar create a safe space for students to come into their own in expressing their views, thoughts, concerns. He doesn’t speak for them, but models respectful interaction and in true mentoring, he provides the necessary scaffolding for students to move forward, even in difficult and challenging situations where truth speaks to power. And it is his presence as a role model on campus and in the classroom, that supports the recruitment, retention, and graduation of all students that results in the rich tapestry of our student body.
I have seen the same skill, heart and vision in his committee work for the department, college, and university. Whether it is the Chancellor’s Advisory Committee for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion or the Advisory Committee for UNCG’s comprehensive transition certificate program for students with intellectual disabilities, Beyond Academics, Omar brings his thoughtful and informed voice and 150% effort to identify and effect solutions.

This track record of bone deep commitment is echoed in his extensive and generous work in the community. Omar serves on the board of directors of several community-based organizations, including the national All Stars Project, which transforms the lives of young people in low wealth communities by using improvisation to cultivate creative learning environments for students who are less likely to have this type of mentoring that helps them tap into their potential. In my role as VC for Research and Engagement, I interact regularly with these community partners. They would confirm Omar’s unique and substantive contributions in creating a more level playing field for all our community. Their view of UNCG is enhanced because of their interaction with Omar.

In conclusion, Omar’s scholarship; his work with students both in and out of the classroom; his contributions to the department, college, and the university; and finally, his impact on regional, state, national and international communities position Omar as one of the most outstanding leaders in diversity and inclusion on our campus. I strongly support his consideration for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

Terri L. Shelton, Ph.D.
Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement
Carol Jenkins Mattocks Distinguished Professor
January 16, 2018

Professor John Kiss, Dean
College of Arts and Sciences
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
105 Foust Building
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170

Dear Dean Kiss,

I am writing you to recommend Professor Omar Ali, Dean of the Lloyd International Honors College for a Diversity Award in the UNC at Greensboro’s College of Arts and Sciences. Dean Ali possesses multiple attributes that makes him a fitting candidate for such an award: first, he develops organizational talent; second, he cultivates internal and external resources to support the University’s mission; and third, he is a fearless champion for diversity, inclusiveness and equity at UNC Greensboro.

Professor Ali develops organizational talent. While he serves as Professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies, he has facilitated the placement of numerous UNC Greensboro students, into advance degree programs and professional careers. Similarly, Dean Ali has been a key figure in the implementation of the International Honors Research program (for undergraduate students) and the Honors Interdisciplinary Research Seminar at UNC Greensboro. I believe Professor Ali’s greatest asset, at its core, is connecting with the individuals, whether student or faculty, and nurturing the innate talent possessed by each person.

Dean Ali cultivates internal and external resources to support the institution’s mission. In his roles as Dean and Professor, Dr. Ali has been awarded countless grants and external funding since 2005. Professor Ali’s exceptional grant-writing ability provides the College of Arts and Sciences with an additional conduit of resources to support the University’s mission in sharing and promoting African American and African Diaspora Studies and Social Justice.

Dr. Ali has been involved in several scholarly and community activities throughout his professional career. Dean Ali has distinguished himself in his field and at the UNC Greensboro as a serious, intelligent and committed scholar. Professor Ali has given several well received presentations at national and international conferences and has performed empirical research studies the most recent example of this works is his latest book entitled “Malik Ambar: Power and Slavery Across the Indian Ocean.”

Finally, Dean Ali’s delightful personality permeates his relationship with others, which contributes to a good group-working environment for project goal obtainment. His exemplary professional demeanor and background of various experiences serves him well as a personal and professional role model for students, staff and faculty alike. Dean Ali is a strong and courageous campus leader.

I, therefore, highly recommend Professor Omar Ali, Dean of the Lloyd International Honors College without reservation for acceptance as the 2018 College of Arts and Sciences Diversity Award Winner.

Sincerely,

Joseph M. Green, Ph. D., Executive Director
Retention, Progression, & Completion and Student Success Center
Dear Dr. Kiss,

I would like to promote Dr. Omar Ali, Dean of the Lloyd International Honors College, for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity & Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Ali exemplifies the diversity and inclusiveness values of the College of Arts and Sciences, and the University’s diversity and inclusiveness mission. He has undertaken to inform and positively influence the future of the University through programs such as Monday Play!, Community Play!, Bridging the Gap, Tedx talks, and through his teaching, service and leadership.

Within Monday Play! and Bridging the Gap, Dr. Ali infuses the campus community with a shared understanding of how we learn and play, without the inhibitions of adult life, including our regrettable and negative cultural influences such as racism, ageism, and the other -isms that can detract from making us the great University we can be. Within the several programs around improvisation, Dr. Ali utilizes the shared space and laughter that arises from the sessions to delve deeper into other issues and provides social tools to turn negative situations to the positive.

These improvisation sessions are open to the campus community providing opportunities for the various constituents, faculty, staff and students, on campus to come together in the open and shared space. Students in their first year of the Honors College are required to attend at least one session to experience the diverse learning opportunities provided by each different group. Students take this experience back to their major, the classroom, and their other interests within the community. More than one student, staff and faculty member left with ideas about the potential possibilities on how they can use the tools in their fields of study and workspace.

In the greater community of Greensboro, Community Play! is brought to the children who need leadership activities in lower-income areas in the elementary and middle school age range. They are exposed to the idea that college is not out of their reach. They learn and gain confidence through the power of play. Community Play! provides the tools to kids to help them succeed in life.

Dr. Ali never stops teaching and sharing the wealth of opportunities that true diversity and inclusiveness provides to the members of our campus community and the members of our greater
Greensboro community. It is for this reason, that I highly recommend Dr. Omar Ali for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity & Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences.

I am more than happy to speak with you regarding Dr. Ali’s merit. Please contact me for more information at s_dreier@uncg.edu or 336-708-2353.

Thank you,

Sarah

Sarah Dreier-Kasik
Dr. John Kiss  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
105 Foust Building  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170

Dear Dr. John Kiss:

Please accept this letter as a formal recommendation for Dr. Omar Ali for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity & Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences.

While many students at UNCG struggle to find faculty members who have time to provide them with support and guidance, I have been fortunate to have Dr. Ali serve as my mentor. Dr. Ali was the key note speaker for the Notable Latinos Gala 2017. I was so moved by his speech that I shared a few of my thoughts through Instagram (a social media platform). To my surprise the next morning Dr. Ali emailed me after his wife came across my post and showed it to him. He wanted to hear about how Latino students are organizing at UNCG and how he could help. This has been the first and only time that any faculty at UNCG has taken such a proactive interest in supporting my vision.

Through Dr. Ali’s guidance and advice my initial idea of a student group has evolved into a coalition made up of six student organizations and over 100 members. My story is one of many. Dr. Ali is always looking for ways to support students and faculty in creating a more diverse and inclusive environment at UNCG. He is always willing to volunteer his time whether it be as a speaker, panelist, mentor or advisor. Students know they can turn to Dr. Ali for advice and support. The dedication of Dr. Ali is like no other. I can confidently say that Dr. Ali’s commitment to inclusiveness and diversity, passion for serving others, and dedication to mentoring students will make him one of the most qualified and stand out candidates in your review process.

Sincerely,

Yaseline Muñoz

Ms. Yaseline Muñoz  
Lead Coordinator, Mi Placita Latinx Coalition  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
EUC Suite 062  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
(336) 964-5952 | y_munoz2@uncg.edu
Dr. John Kiss  
- The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
105 Foust Building  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170

January 16, 2018

Dear Dean Kiss,

I am delighted to recommend Dr. Omar Ali for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences. I have known Dr. Ali since 2013, when we co-founded, along with Dr. Asa Eger, the Islamic Studies Research Network (ISRN) at UNCG. His interest in promoting and supporting that network — and his consistency in doing so, even after he took on greater responsibilities as the Dean of the Lloyd International Honors College -- demonstrates his commitment to “promoting and advocating for a campus environment that welcomes diversity.” Our network strives to increase awareness and understanding of Islamic history and culture in North Carolina and in a wider, global context through events such as public lectures, film screenings, art exhibits, and music and dance performances. In so doing, the ISRN aims (among other goals) to create an environment that makes Muslim students feel more welcome and included. Dr. Ali, like the other Lead Scholars of the ISRN, has been vigilant in supporting these efforts — efforts that, I believe, will ultimately have a “significant impact on the College community in terms of diversity and inclusion.”

Below I highlight just a few of the ISRN events in which Dr. Ali has taken a particularly active role — all of them notable for their efforts to open up conversations about race and religion:

- Fall 2013: Dr. Ali moderated a discussion about the WRAL documentary “Faith, Fear, and Freedom,” which looks at the lives of Muslims in North Carolina. About 110 undergraduates attended.
- Spring 2016: Dr. Ali facilitated a panel called “Islam and the Indian Ocean: From Fatimid Egypt to India’s Deccan.” About 30 students attended.
- Fall 2016: Dr. Ali organized a lecture by noted scholar Sylviane Diouf on “African Muslims and Southern Slavery: Omar Ibn Said of West Africa and North Carolina.” About 46 students attended.
Apart from events organized by the ISRN, Dr. Ali has taken part in many other activities aimed at diminishing damaging stereotypes about Islam and supporting Muslim students on campus. After the brutal killings of three young Muslims in Chapel Hill in 2015, Dr. Ali co-led a UNCG vigil that had been coordinated by the Muslim Student Association—a group with which Dr. Ali is closely affiliated. He also took a lead role in the same group’s “Ask a Muslim” campaign at the Elliott University Center that year, which aimed to get Muslim and non-Muslim students talking in a positive way and to demystify Muslim thought and practice.

Dr. Ali’s frequent sharing of his research on topics related to Islam, whether in the classroom or another forum, likewise works toward the goal of inclusiveness. Last fall, he gave a guest lecture about Malik Ambar (d. 1626), a slave-turned-ruler who exerted much influence in the Deccan and the subject of one of Dr. Ali’s books, to two sections of an Introduction to Islam class that I teach. The talk was very well received. Later one student wrote that he found the lecture to be one of the most surprising and important takeaways from the class, writing, “When I think of the religion of Islam and Africans, I tend to only focus on African Americans (Malcolm X, NOI, Muhammad Ali). So hearing about the religion in Africa was definitely something new.”

Dr. Ali’s own background, as well as his willingness and ability to bring his own experiences into his teaching and other presentations, lend effectiveness to his efforts to promote a diverse culture on campus. When speaking of Islamophobia in America and of the negative stereotyping of Muslims during the 2013 “Faith, Fear, and Freedom” discussion, for example, he revealed that his own parents requested for him as a teenager to change his name to a less “Muslim-sounding” one. By placing himself into the debate, but doing so in a way that neither blamed nor victimized — but, instead, historically deconstructed the reasons behind certain perceptions and actions — he drove home his themes in a way that touched others and helped them to learn not only facts and figures but (as importantly) how to speak in a way that builds on who people are.

In all of these ways, and many more, Dr. Ali has shown his commitment to creating a campus environment that welcomes and celebrates diversity. I applaud his dedication, and highly commend him to your considered attention for this award.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Alyssa Gabbay, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies
Dear Dean Kiss and Review Committee,

Over the past 5 years, it has been an honor and a privilege to work closely with Professor Omar Ali as a colleague, co-teacher, co-organizer, and friend. Omar’s efforts to promote diversity and inclusiveness reach every corner of the UNCG campus, and extend far into the surrounding community. I experience the impact of these efforts every day, on my own teaching, and in my interactions with students and colleagues. Omar’s contributions are so profound that I find it difficult to condense them in the form of a single letter. I’ll do my best.

I have been a teacher for over 20 years. I teach a tough subject, chemistry, to a diverse student population. Throughout my career, I have been disturbed by the divide between the students who “get” chemistry, and those who do not. I have watched many students fail out of my classes. The ones I lose are disproportionately from poor and working class backgrounds, and disproportionately African American students. This is largely an issue of access; those who understand the system, and have the preparation to effectively navigate it, succeed. Those who don’t are left by the wayside. Being aware of the problem is one thing; knowing what to do about it is another. Throughout my career, and before I met Omar, I often felt like a helpless cog in an unjust machine. Working with Omar has utterly changed that perspective. Through his example, I have learned how to better connect as a mentor and anchor with students who are struggling. I have come to practice, very intentionally, Omar’s methodology, a methodology that I will attempt to distill for you here.

I met Omar in the fall of 2016, when I joined the College of Arts and Sciences Diversity Committee, of which Omar was chair. In working with the Diversity Committee, Omar did something miraculous. He related to every one of us in the room as fellow organizers. In my case specifically, he immediately talked to me and about me as if I was an expert in working with students from diverse backgrounds. “Nadja, what tricks do you use to help support students in your classroom? Can you share them with us?” He suggested I serve on a panel on this topic, and write an article about it. In so doing, Omar was performing what he calls “relating to me ahead of myself,” that is, relating to me as the person that I
could become. He didn’t try to tell me how to support my students in developing better chemistry skills; he simply acted as if I already knew how. Here’s where it gets really meta. The approach Omar was using with me was the same approach I needed to apply with my own students. I needed to relate to them as fellow chemists, and voila, chemists they would become.

Ask Omar about his methodology and he’ll be happy to share. “It’s so simple.” He says. “You ask people questions. And then you listen to them, really listen, and then affirm and build on what they’re saying.” This is it, the magic recipe in a few short sentences. It’s this transformative approach that Omar applies in all of his interactions, intentionally and consistently, and with utter equanimity. To put it simply, he believes in people, all people, and by listening to them, he gives them a voice.

Walking across campus with Omar is like being in the presence of a celebrity; he knows everyone. He stops first to speak in rapid French with a police officer driving a golf cart. The officer is from Cameroon; they met at a workshop Omar facilitated. A few minutes later he comes upon a grounds crew working outside McIver. He knows many of them from another workshop series he facilitated with campus facilities. “When are you going to do another one?” They ask. Outside of Sullivan we meet up with a student from one of Omar’s classes. She says she has been meaning to talk with him about a problem she’s having that is impacting her coursework. Omar checks his watch, four minutes until the next meeting. “Let’s walk and talk,” he suggests, and off they go. She has his full attention. This is what it looks like to support people. This is what Omar does every day, all day.

Throughout our experience in higher education, we are taught to work alone, to work seriously, to be critical of each other, and to be hypercompetitive. Omar challenges this paradigm, encouraging us to work together, to be spontaneous, and to have fun. If this sounds fluffy and easy, don’t be fooled. We don’t have fun instead of work, we build community by interacting in positive, fun and spontaneous ways, and then we work together, really, really hard.

When it comes to hard work, Omar leads by example. He never turns down a request for a meeting, and interacts weekly with more than half a dozen campus groups that he co-organizes. He constantly ventures into the community or travels outside the state and country. One day he gives a talk at Guilford Technical Community College, and the next he presents at the United Nations. While serving as Dean of the Honors College, he (voluntarily) maintains a major presence as a teacher in the College of Arts and Sciences, leading a course on African American History to nearly 100 students. He also teaches a second course for the Honors College composed of McNair scholars. These are first generation college students and kids from under-represented groups who have received scholarship from the McNair program (which Omar helped to establish) to prepare them to pursue PhDs. This semester there were two students who couldn’t attend the McNair course because of scheduling conflicts. Omar is meeting with them individually each week as an independent study to make sure they keep up with the readings and course material. About these extra meetings, his perspective is, as always, positive. “It’s so helpful!” he says. “I’m learning so much.”

What is perhaps most miraculous about Omar’s approach is his willingness, again and again, to relinquish the power to others. In so doing, he immeasurably magnifies his impact. As an example of this, let’s go back to that first meeting of the College of Arts and Sciences Diversity Committee. Omar is looking around the room at each of us. “Let’s think outside the box.” He says, “What do you want to accomplish to support diversity on our campus?”

I actually have an initiative in mind, a secret desire to overhaul the (severely broken) UNCG parental leave policies. It seems like a somewhat ludicrous proposal. I have no clue how university policies are
established, and absolutely no idea how one might go about changing one. I am also a mom of two small children running a research group of 14 students and trying to maintain funding from the National Institutes of Health. The last thing I need is another project. But there I am, faced with the expectant and encouraging gaze of Omar Ali. I can’t help myself. I raise my hand.

Changing the UNCG parental leave policy takes two years. We work with leaders of Faculty Senate, The Provost, and multiple UNCG committees. We write memos and letters. We collect stories from other UNCG parents, read up on best practices, and research leave policies on other campuses. When progress stalls, I call Omar. When I don’t know what to do next, I call Omar. Through his leadership, his connections, and by his example as a powerful organizer, we preserve.

UNCG’s faculty parental leave policies, which in 2013 were the worst in the UNC system, are now the best. New parents can take a full semester of leave after the birth or adoption of a baby. It’s a gender neutral policy, which means it supports gender equality on our campus. Changing that policy was a journey we never would have embarked upon had Omar not convinced us, as he does so many of our colleagues and students every day, that the impossible is, after all, possible.

If you ask UNCG students on the autism spectrum, they will tell you that Omar is their personal champion. As our Muslim students? They’ll say the same. So will our African American students, our LatinX students, our police officers, and our campus facilities workers. When one examines his greater impact, however, one realizes that Omar is not just a champion to any one group. He is a champion of the people, because he recognizes the interconnectedness of us all.

In reading my letter and others in this file, you may say find yourself wondering, How does he do it? How does a single person accomplish so much without burning out? The answer appears to be in the giving itself. As Omar will tell you, the more you give, the more you have to give. The joy is, after all, in the sharing. To witness Omar in action, one must only believe that this is true.

In writing this letter, I add my voice to that of so many who have been changed by their interactions with Omar. Surely you know others who have. I think it is important for us in the College of Arts and Sciences to recognize Omar with this award. Not so much because he is so deserving (clearly he is), but because awarding Omar with the Diversity Award will give others a chance to learn by his example. If we want to make UNCG and our surrounding community more inclusive and supportive of people from all backgrounds, all we need to do is follow Omar’s lead. Let’s do this together. Let’s start now.

Sincerely,

Nadja B. Cech, Ph.D.
Patricia A. Sullivan Distinguished Professor of Chemistry
External Community Letters of Support for
Dr. Omar Ali
Nomination for Dean’s Diversity Award

**Included in This Section:**
- William Osteen, Jr., U.S. District Court
- Janet Harrell, Program Coordinator for English & Social Studies, Guilford County Schools
- Paul Lester, Greensboro Chief of Police
October 4, 2017

Dr. Omar H. Ali
Dean - Lloyd International Honors College
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
PO Box 26170
Greensboro, North Carolina 27402-6170

Dear Dr. Ali:

Thank you for your time and consideration during the inaugural diversity symposium. Your comments and insights were thoughtful and very helpful to encouraging honesty, diversity, and inclusion in this district. I was also highly impressed with your abilities as a moderator. That’s not an easy task, to listen, consider, and thoughtfully provoke further discussion on various points made during the responses by the panelists.

We have some wonderful people working in the Middle District of North Carolina, and your comments and responses will improve this court even more. I anticipate many more “yes, and . . .” discussions in this district.

Thank you for all you did in this symposium. Good luck to you.

Sincerely,

William L. Osteen, Jr.

WLOjr:1fc
January 24, 2018

Crossroads
700 Walter Reed Drive
Greensboro, NC 27403

Dr. John Kiss, Dean of Arts and Sciences
The UNC-G College of Arts and Sciences
105 Foust Building
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170

Dr. Kiss:

This correspondence serves to support Dr. Omar H. Ali as a candidate for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences. Without reservation, I can attest to him being one of the most remarkable educators and individuals I have had the pleasure of knowing.

I had occasion to meet Dr. Ali in November 2011, while attending an annual conference that was sponsored by the UNC-G Department of African American Studies. He was an Associate Professor and the Director of Graduate Studies. Since that time, Dr. Ali has been instrumental in helping to expand the departmental offerings to include an expansive study of the African Diaspora and its relation to diversity.

Since meeting Dr. Ali, he has worked consistently with my school, peers, and students while providing guidance, curriculum and support for social studies and social skills development. In addition, he has solicited my involvement in the forums, seminars and community discussions provided under the auspices of his departments and/or the University, in general.

Throughout the years, Dr. Ali has been an integral and invaluable support within my high school program. He has volunteered to work with me and my students in personal and phenomenal ways. I teach in a specialty program for exceptional youngsters enrolled in the Guilford County Schools. The program (Crossroads) is comprised of students in grades 6-12 who have behavioral
and/or emotional difficulties. (e.g. attentional difficulties, anxieties, phobias, depression, mood disorders, autism). The separate school program is housed at Cone Behavioral Health Center, a psychiatric facility.

Dr. Ali has come to know the staff and students at Crossroads on a very personal level. He listens attentively and speaks not only to the academic pursuits of students but also to their personal growth. He provides strategies to help them to pursue their aspirations as well as opportunities for practice and refinement. (e.g. public speaking, improvisational play) He has assisted students to become knowledgeable about as well as accepting of differences in race/ethnicity, religion and gender preference. One recent graduate was so positively impacted by Dr. Ali that he chose to attend UNC-G and major in political science. His request to Dr. Ali to become his mentor was readily accepted.

In addition to personally providing a range of activities to Crossroads, Dr. Ali has also gifted our school program with stellar interns and student teachers who not unlike their professor have volunteered and returned to interact and exceed their specified duties. These interactions have been remarkable for our students who often feel excluded, based on having special needs. The teachers and program administrator speak frequently and highly of the contributions that Dr. Ali and his students provide.

Yearly, in my school program, Dr. Ali provides words of encouragement for graduating seniors. What we find most fascinating and selfless is that Dr. Ali makes the effort to show up to provide programming for our students each year during his fall and/or spring break, when he could very easy have other plans. Without fail, he sees Crossroads as a priority. These acts, indeed, are representative of his exceptional commitment.

During a summer seminar in 2013, sponsored by the North Carolina Humanities Council, Dr. Ali was one of the presenters for the week. There were 35 teachers from across the state and the topic was Islam. The week was filled with numerous presentations as well as excursions to UNC-Chapel Hill libraries and archives and to a mosque in Fayetteville. Throughout the week, it was very enlightening to hear participants speak very highly of Dr. Ali’s knowledge, energy delivery and sincerity. It was a proud moment for those of us who were aware of his skills and finesse in making “the least of us” feel included on a meaningful level.

For the past few years, I have been involved with Dr. Ali on a project he terms, Community Play! One facet of the project with which I have been involved is focused on members of a low income African-American community. Adults and youngsters (those who live in the community and those of us who want to be a part of the celebrated group) come together and learn to value history, ourselves and others by showcasing strengths and talents in zone where risk-taking is encouraged and celebrated while we display our interconnectedness, as humans. Activities have included but not been limited to spoken word/poetry workshops, collaborative writing, museum visits, talent shows, and dramatic play reading. Through participation, I have learned so
much that I have been able to incorporate into teaching or that has spoken to my spirit, as a human being. Frequently, Dr. Ali and designated students visit throughout the community which provides opportunities to chat and become a trusted part of the fabric of the community. Dr. Ali is accepted, trusted and respected in this venue, as well.

Dr. Ali champions any cause that facilitates diversity and the preservation of dignity. This is consistently displayed at the University and in other arenas in which he presents. This skill is of monumental importance, given the racial/ethnic/religious/political challenges abound today, in the streets and media. He conducts forums and discussions that allow students to sound off and gather catharsis in safe, understanding arenas. Dr. Ali and the University are to be commended for ministering to the needs of students and others, in this fashion.

Dr. Omar. H. Ali is indeed the consummate educator. Given his breadth of knowledge, coupled with a gentle, likable demeanor and task follow-through, he will no doubt excel in any capacity, truthfully. Teaching is his calling and passion. He is one of the most legitimate role models I know. The benchmark of a great teacher is to engage learners, impart knowledge and have learners value the experience. These qualities personify Dr. Omar H. Ali.

Sincerely,

Janet Harrell, Program Coordinator for English& Social Studies (High School)

Guilford County Schools - Crossroads
January 18, 2018

Ms. Anna Nugent
The College of Arts and Sciences
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
1000 Foust Building
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170

Dear Ms. Nugent,

I am writing to express my full endorsement of Dr. Omar Ali for the Diversity Award from the UNCG College of Arts and Sciences.

I believe that it is important for you to know that my endorsement does not simply address Omar’s professional abilities, but also his strength of creativity and innovative approach to conflict resolution. I am fortunate to say that I have had the privilege of working with Omar for several years, and during that time I have witnessed his undeniable dedication, devotion, and commitment to diversity and inclusiveness.

Not only is Omar an incredible resource for the police department but he is the kind of person that really cares about people and how they feel. Omar goes above and beyond normal expectations to meet the needs of others and is willing to go the extra mile. He is more committed to diversity and inclusiveness than anyone else I know. Omar is an outstanding professor, dean, and friend.

I know that he would be an excellent choice for this award and a grateful recipient.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Lester, Sr.
Chief of Police
UNCG Student Letters of Support for
Dr. Omar Ali
Nomination for Dean’s Diversity Award

Included in This Section:

- Aliyah Ruffin letter of support
- Derick Jones letter of support
- Justina Licata letter of support
- Lindsay Caesar letter of support
- Nils Skudra letter of support
- Omar Obregon-Cuebas letter of support
- Domonique Edwards letter of support
My name is Aliyah Ruffin, and I am writing this letter on behalf of Dr. Omar Ali, and his nomination for the Diversity Award. I honestly do not know where to begin this letter because it is so much to be said about Dr. Ali. I could write about his accolades, status, and the many books and articles he has published, or the impact of the philosophy he promotes, the pedagogy of improvisation and play, around UNCG’s campus. Dr. Ali’s philosophy alone is the foundation of several groups such as Community Play All-stars Project, Monday Play, Bridging the Gap, and is being used within the Honors College. It is clear that Dr. Ali has created a successful career, and his implementation of the pedagogy of improvisation and play on and off of UNCG’s campus. Yet, this is a shallow representation of the value of Dr. Ali’s presence not only in the community but in the lives he touches.

Specifically, I would like to shed light on the tremendous amount of light Dr. Ali has shed in my life. I come from humble beginnings. Born and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina to a single mother we didn’t have much. Living in low income communities, and receiving the basic education from elementary to middle school. High school was a different story. I was accepted into an early college and was pushed to excel in my studies. After I graduated I was advised to go to college. Even though I had no idea what I wanted to do I applied to UNCG and was accepted. The transition was hard. I struggled a lot my whole time throughout college, but I met an angel I could say my junior year who has been shedding light on my life ever since.

I joined Community Play All-stars Project my junior year of college. I was so lost and needed an outlet where I could feel accepted. My friendships were falling apart, I was financially struggling and the party scene was no longer my scene. Being introduced to this organization saved my life. My first time going to a meeting I was shocked to see so many diverse faces, but by the end of the meeting I felt right at home. I was a little shy so I never really talked much
during the philosophical conversations during the Monday meetings. My favorite part was going
to Warnersville, a low-income community, and interacting with the people within the community
and holding workshops at the recreation center. It melted my heart to be able to serve a
community that reminded me of where I grew up.

Behind this organization was Dr. Omar Ali. Every time I came to the meetings he would
have a smile on his face, and greet me. He was so kind and welcoming, and he did not even
know me. Where I am from people are not like Dr. Ali, besides family so at first it was strange to
me. Sometimes I would wonder how he maintains his enlightened presence. I would just listen to
the things he would say in the philosophical meeting in awe. I found myself wanting to obtain
this aura. Then it connected with me that this is what improvisations and play is about. What I
have been learning about growth, and development and the correlations between improvisation
and play I could use in my own life. After having that epiphany, I decided I wanted to be just like
Dr. Ali.

Going in to my senior year I started to talk to him, and take his advice so that I could
build a relationship with him. He encouraged me to apply to the Honors College and add African
American and African Diaspora Studies as a major so I did. He invited me to go to a conference
in New York City, which I have never been prior too, and I accepted. He pushed me to present at
conferences. I did that as well. He encouraged me to take on roles that I never seem myself doing
before. My entire attitude about life has changed since I met Dr. Ali. I will let you in on a little
secret sometimes when I am feeling depressed I ask myself what would Dr. Ali say or do and it
always gets me out of my funk. He has gave me so much inspiration in my life. He has
encouraged me to grow and to keep growing, and plays a prominent role in why I am taking the
steps to become an educator now.

Sincerely,

Aliyah Ruffin
Dear Review Committee,

As a graduate student leader, and voice for many other students, it is with humility and honor that I write a letter in strong support of Professor Omar Ali receiving the College of Arts and Sciences Diversity Award. Many people like myself, consider him a man who has high integrity and pushes others to be their best. Since knowing Professor Ali, he has never forced his beliefs, ideas on myself or my colleagues. He is a strong-willed professor who believes in true mentorship of students and faculty. With the highest respect towards his character, he is the exact type of Professor I would want to be in my career. With my knowledge of Professor Ali, it is my belief that he would tell me to rephrase that last statement because he would want me to not be him but be the greatest person I can be, and ensure me that I am a trailblazer and force to be reckoned with. In talking with other students and colleagues and Professors who know Dr. Ali, I gather they have the exact same opinion of him if not something better.

Dr. Omar Ali possess such a powerful characteristic that many cannot portray and that is “ownership”. He recognizes his own beliefs, he recognizes his worth, he acknowledges those around him, and he remains humble and easy to talk with always. He is truly a man who knows no boundaries when it comes to students and colleagues. He is truly a voice for his generation and my generation alike. When first introduced to Dr. Ali, I was shocked to know that he even existed. Whilst reading this letter, one may wonder what it is meant by the statement, to be clearer, as an African American gay male student in the Medicinal Biochemistry program, I found Dr. Ali to be one of two professors that never saw the color on my skin, embraced me and truly cared about me as an individual. The fact that I was able to feel this without him saying a single word should be able to speak for itself.

Often times, many will see Dr. Ali is a championing for his students. He is one who embraces diversity. Recently I had faced a situation on campus that I felt needed to be addressed yet embraced with love for the people that work, live, and/or are part of this campus community. Dr. Ali, as many know, sat down with me and developed a plan with me. He got in contact with the right personnel to have meetings with and often I did not have to say a word. He would ensure that there was space for me to speak at any given opportunity. He made me feel as if I existed in a place when I felt that everyone was against me. His actions spoke up for me when I did not have a voice. He is on many programming committees and is an avid supporter of many diversity activities. He a voice for the underrepresented population without a voice. When I think of Dr. Ali, three words come to mind—Diversity, Inclusiveness, and Trailblazer!

In this short letter of strong support, I hope that the committee acknowledges his achievements, his credentials, his recent accomplishments, and the things in this letter he has supported me and many of my colleagues with. Many are deserving of this Award, and I am sure of it, but I truly hope that Dr. Ali’s passion and perseverance for change will speak on his behalf, in ways this letter cannot.

I am truly thankful to write this letter in strong support of Professor Omar Ali. If there are any questions that I can answer in more detail for this selection, please feel free to contact me at ddjones4@uncg.edu.

Thank you, strong consideration of Dr. Omar Ali, 2018 Diversity Award Recipient (College of Arts and Sciences).

Derick D. Jones Jr., M.S.
Graduate Student Association—Vice President
Ph.D. Student - Medicinal Biochemistry
Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry
The University of North Carolina Greensboro
January 21, 2018

Dear Review Committee,

It is my pleasure to recommend Dr. Omar Ali for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences. As Dr. Ali’s teaching assistant, I have supported him in both African American and African Diaspora Studies and Honors College courses. Working with Dr. Ali in the classroom has allowed me to observe his teaching styles and interactions with an array of students. Additionally, outside of the classroom, Dr. Ali works tirelessly to make the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s campus a place that all students feel encouraged to learn and grow without judgment.

One way Dr. Ali promotes diversity in his courses is by incorporating a number of guest speakers throughout the semester. For example, his African American and African Diaspora Studies course last semester included a talk by Natacha Nikokeza, who in 2008 traveled to the U.S. from Burundi, a small country in East Africa, as a refugee. She has since received her law degree and works at the Center for New North Carolinians helping other refugees. Dr. Ali also invited Nodia Mena, who was born in Honduras and is a member of the Garifunas ethnic group, which is made up of the mix-raced descendants of West Africans, Carib Indians, and Arawak Indians who settled on the northern coast of Honduras in the 1700s. Ms. Mena’s discussion focused on the Garifunas’s culture showing that its language, food, and traditions reflected the Garifunina’s racially diverse origins. Lastly, Max Carter, a former professor at Guilford College, visited the class to discuss the Quakers involvement in the Underground Railroad in Greensboro in the nineteenth century. Through his examination of Quakers Americans’ work to help runaway slaves reach freedom, Mr. Carter’s talk highlighted a biracial effort to fight a societal injustice. Dr. Ali’s inclusion of a variety of voices in the classroom demonstrates his dedication to diversity, and this practice allows his students to connect with different individuals and moments in history.

In addition to racial diversity, Dr. Ali is committed to supporting a variety of students throughout UNCG’s campus. In the fall of 2016, Dr. Ali was approached by Nils Skudra, a graduate student in UNCG’s History Department, about the lack of on campus support for students on the autism spectrum. Although Dr. Ali had little expertise regarding the autism spectrum, he jumped at the opportunity to support Nils and other students on the spectrum. Nils and Dr. Ali founded the group Spectrum at UNCG to provide a safe space for all autistic students both on UNCG’s campus and other nearby colleges and universities.

While Dr. Ali is an remarkable lecturer, as seen from his impressive Ted Talks, I think one of his greatest talents and gifts is his ability to connect with students and to make every student he works with feel validated. Although Dr. Ali is an accomplished historian who holds an important position on campus as the Dean of the Honors College, he is one of the most approachable professors I have ever encountered. In spite of his busy schedule, Dr. Ali always makes himself available to his students, and his ability to encourage student to succeed is unmatched. This is a gift Dr. Ali gives all of his students. It has been a true honor to work alongside Dr. Ali. Watching him teach and interact with
students has taught me to encourage my students to exceed even their own expectations. His commitment and enthusiasm toward all students regardless of their position, background, or experiences makes Dr. Ali the perfect candidate for Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness in the College of Arts and Sciences.

If I can be of further assistance, or provide you with more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best,

Justina Licata

Ph.D. Candidate
UNCG History Department
January 23, 2018

Dear Review Committee,

I am writing this letter to recommend Dr. Omar Ali for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness. I have had the pleasure of learning from Dr. Ali under a variety of different circumstances, and I believe that he is the perfect candidate for this award. Dr. Ali is a leader both in the UNCG community and beyond, and empowers students through raising awareness around issues of equity, inclusion, and diversity.

Dr. Ali currently teaches as a professor of Global and Comparative African Diaspora History at UNCG, and although I have never taken one of his classes, I have at least one pertinent example of his ability to empower students in the classroom. One of my close friends that I have met doing community organizing in Greensboro has admitted to having some shame because of her mixed race. She is a Black trans woman with Latin American roots, and has not only been marginalized by society as a whole, but has consistently been marginalized by the very communities she belongs to. She has felt that she is not Black enough, not Latin enough, or not feminine enough. I spoke with her about her experience at UNCG, and she told me about her coursework with Dr. Ali. The fact that he had a course dedicated to Afro-Latin America gave this student a sense of pride in her heritage and has empowered her to speak out about her experiences. I have loved watching her grow and find her voice over the past year. I attribute at least some of this empowerment to Dr. Ali, for allowing my friend to see herself and her history represented in a university setting.

Dr. Ali has also served as a valuable member of the Diversity Committee through the College of Arts and Sciences where he participated in conversations around diversity and inclusion practices for faculty hiring. Currently at UNCG, the percentage of Black students is nearly 10 times the percentage of Black professors. There are considerably more Muslim students, queer students, and other minority students than professors of the same identities. To truly create a space where all students feel empowered to be successful in whatever field they choose, we need to have faculty that represent our diverse student population as well. Dr. Ali has been a strong advocate for hiring diverse faculty, and has welcomed students, staff, and other faculty into the strategizing process. He recognizes that it is not only important to recruit these faculty members, but also to create a community where they feel sustained and empowered.

Finally, I would like to touch on Dr. Ali’s extracurricular involvement with Community Play!, an organization centered on diversity and community engagement. This incredible organization uses improvisational performance art to empower both UNCG students and children in the poor and working-class Warnersville community to grow and develop through play. I find this approach incredibly refreshing! Too often, especially as adults, we forget the importance of playing and engaging with our fellow humans. We begin to believe that learning is something given to us, and not something that we do ourselves. By using improv and performance art as a way to engage the community, we get to create something beautiful together, ultimately teaching us to collaborate and grow.

I hope that you will consider Dr. Ali for the Dean’s Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusiveness. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for Dr. Ali, and am very pleased to be able to recommend him for this award.

Best,

Lindsay Caesar

MS—Plant and Environmental Sciences, Clemson University
PhD Candidate—Medicinal Biochemistry, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
301 McIver Street, Greensboro NC 27412
Dear Review Committee,

A year and a half ago I had the great fortune to meet Prof. Omar Ali at UNCG’s Honors College. I was in my first year of graduate school, having recently arrived from California, and was feeling depressed due to the fact that I had left behind all of my autism support networks in the San Francisco Bay Area and had found virtually nothing in the way of such networks here in Greensboro. As a person with Asperger’s Syndrome, I was the recipient of numerous support services for young adults on the autism spectrum in California, but upon my arrival in North Carolina I learned that virtually all autism services in this State end after an individual turns 18, and UNCG had practically nothing in the way of autism networks other than the OARS office which, while providing basic academic accommodations, did not offer services specifically relating to autism. In addition, the Beyond Academics program charged substantial fees for its services, which my financially challenged family could not afford to pay. In light of these conditions I was very determined that there should be some sort of autism support network on campus.

It was in this context that I established contact with Prof. Ali. He offered to help me in establishing an autism organization at UNCG so that I could connect with other students on the autism spectrum and thereby have a community network that I would feel comfortable in. This effort came to fruition in the form of Spectrum at UNCG, which is dedicated to promoting autism awareness on campus and fostering community for autistic students so that they may feel more self-confident in their abilities for self-advocacy and in openly identifying as individuals on the autism spectrum. Prof. Ali agreed to serve as the faculty adviser for the group, and in this capacity he has shown great open-mindedness toward members’ insights about autism, as well as extremely helpful in setting and promoting the group’s agenda. During this past semester he arranged for Spectrum to hold a panel presentation in which he, myself and other members led an informational discussion about autism with his class, and the students in attendance were highly participatory and attentive. The group will be holding another panel discussion for Prof. Ali’s class later in this semester.

Prof. Ali is an exceptionally kind and caring individual who spares no expense in trying to help others. During my first semester at UNCG he personally interceded on my behalf with my graduate instructors in order to highlight my challenges as a student with Asperger’s Syndrome so that they could better understand how to work with me and ensure my success in their classes. In addition, Prof. Ali has offered to have a research article which I wrote for Guilford Courthouse National Military Park published in a scholarly journal in the event that the park staff does not see fit to publish it on their website as they had originally promised me. Unexpectedly I have developed a bit of a secondary career as a freelance journalist, and he has rejoiced in my success and encouraged me at every juncture to continue my creative efforts. No word pun intended here, but Prof. Ali has been my ally.

I give him the absolute highest ratings as an educator for not only his professional work in helping me to run Spectrum at UNCG but also his ability to empathize with others and help individuals who are normally marginalized. I particularly like the fact that he has a great sense of humor and great sensitivity towards those who are not neurotypical, such as myself. I always know that I can turn to Prof. Ali for help, and he will give it with an open heart and an open hand. I feel very blessed to have him as a mentor who has so much wisdom and insight which he generously shares with everyone.
Sincerely,

Nils Skudra
Dear Review Committee,

Before I write about Dr. Ali I want to share with you a short story that provides a lot of context of why I appreciate Dr. Ali more than any other educator I have had. One day in my history class in fourth grade I was having a conversation in Spanish with my Chilean friend. After a few minutes, my teacher at the time touched my shoulder and said, “This is America, we speak English here.” That statement was one that contributed massively to the Alienation I had felt as a Latino student. This alienation continued throughout my k-12 education and to some extent today. Dr. Omar Ali, the son of a Peruvian mother and Indian father, knows all too well about alienation because of his background. From the moment I met Dr. Ali to this very day, I have never felt alienated in his presence. He teaches with energy, excitement, and compassion. He has an almost mythical ability to create an environment that is welcoming to people of all backgrounds. Through his playfulness, his absolute belief in the ability of others, and his wonderful listening skills, Dr. Ali masterfully helps you paint your aspirations onto you as if you were a canvas that with some shine could be something as beautiful as The Starry Night. Within 20 minutes of my first meeting with him, he convinced me, a first-semester freshman, that I could present at the North Carolina Honors Association Conference. He believes that we all have the potential to be great and his belief in me gave me the springboard I needed to start my quest for getting into a Ph.D. program. His belief that I will become a scholar, that I will achieve my quest has been massive for me. My teachers in high school never had that same belief in me, they only saw my exterior, my being as it appeared. Dr. Ali, however, sees more not only in me but in all the students that he works with. I began volunteering with Dr. Ali’s organization Community Play!/All Stars in my first semester and just about every volunteer is a student of color. He has shown that he will work with people of all backgrounds and affiliations, students of UNCG or not. I can say that if not for Dr. Ali, I would have transferred from UNCG after my first or second semester. Through Dr. Ali’s guidance, I learned how to get research grants, became part of the inaugural class of UNCG’s McNair Scholars, attained the nationally prestigious Critical Language Scholarship, and have become integrated with the school. I am just one student he has guided, there are many others like me. When I obtain my Ph.D. in philosophy I will remember two educators the most; my fourth-grade teacher who alienated me, and Dr. Ali who believed in me.

Sincerely,

Omar Alexander Obregon-Cuebas, UNCG Class of 2020
Domonique Edwards  
2828 Vanstory Street 2C  
Greensboro, NC 27407  
704-678-8026 daedwar2@uncg.edu

January 25, 2018

Dear Review Committee,

Dr. Omar Ali is a beloved and inspiring professor at UNCG who continuously strives to promote and create diverse and inclusive environments. Whatever our background, he believes in us. His impact on students is profound and wide and I have seen this over the course of five years, starting when I was an undergraduate and now as a Ph.D. student.

I first met Dr. Ali during my sophomore year before he became a dean. Looking back, I was fortunate to have taken one of his classes when I did. Toward the end of the semester he invited me to join a new effort in a local black community, Warnersville, in which he was doing door-to-door outreach and organizing a monthly series of free workshops, classes, and cultural events that would allow people in the community to have a friendly and inviting space to explore a variety of performance opportunities. The program, called Community Play!!/All Stars Project, has been going strong for four years and I have taken over as its co-director, an example of how Dr. Ali inspires students to grow.

Being a young black female, it is rare that I am related to as if I have something meaningful to offer the world. Being overlooked by professors throughout most of my academic career was discouraging in many ways. It wasn’t until I met Dr. Ali that I was finally related to as if I was fully capable of becoming whatever it is that I wanted to become. As a result of his encouragement I decided to challenge myself and pursue disciplinary honors, which was the highlight of my undergraduate experience.

Fast-forward a few years and I am now a doctoral candidate in Human Development and Family Studies at UNCG. Dr. Ali supported me in navigating the emotional and institutional challenges of higher education. Additionally, he gave me tools to not only empower myself but to help support other men and women of color, particularly first-generation students. An example of this is that Dr. Ali has a regular philosophy/community organizing meeting, which I now co-lead, where myself and other students, staff, and faculty of diverse backgrounds engage our assumptions about all sorts of things contemporary and historical and raise our concerns and responses to current events. He is the consummate teacher, but he teaches by helping others become teachers—something the Russian educator Lev Vygotsky calls obuchenie (teach/learn), where teachers and students learn together. This is what he does. During these philosophy/community organizing meetings, many students discover their own agency in shaping their development.

In this and so many other ways Dr. Ali does an exceptional job of providing mentorship, guidance, and direction to students of color, poor and working-class students, and first-generation college students, such as myself, in the context of the many challenges we face. In addition to the regular weekly meetings he holds, he has led Bridging the Gap, which is a program that helps to bridge the gap between students and UNCG police officers. Dr. Ali facilitates these workshops by using play to encourage both students and police to relate to one another in new ways. Because of his reputation as someone to be trusted, students and officers
follow Dr. Ali's lead. He builds trust by creating the conditions and the space for people to have meaningful dialogue and work through sensitive topics related to diversity and inclusion. In addition to the work in Warnersville, in which he has brought out dozens of students from UNCG, as well as with students and police officers on campus, I have also worked with Dr. Ali to support UNCG's grounds staff to learn how to perform in new ways. Over the course of one year we led a series of workshops using performance and improvisation to support some 300 of these workers on campus. There are more examples that I have been witness to regarding Dr. Ali's work on diversity and inclusion: a weekly improvisational session on campus called Monday Play!, bringing students together with faculty and staff, a symposia with the National Humanities Center bringing UNCG students and faculty members together from the sciences and humanities to create new conversations, taking diverse students to national conferences to help them grow, supporting first-generation and students of color to travel abroad, working with students on the autism spectrum, as well as with students in the Beyond Academic program who have intellectual disabilities, working with Muslim students, and Latinx students, and LGBTQ students, and, of course, working with the full range of Honors students.

Like so many other students, I am fortunate to have met, studied, and worked alongside Dr. Ali. He is most deserving of this award.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Domonique Edwards
Supporting Documents of Support for
Dr. Omar Ali
Nomination for Dean’s Diversity Award

Included in This Section:

- The Carolina Peacemaker - Co-authored article with Nodia Mena, Lecturer in Spanish in LLC. Facilitated her presentation on ‘Garifunas in the African Diaspora’
- The Carolinian article - Impactful art series: Dr. Omar Ali
- UNCG Academics & Research article - UNCG Awarded $1.15 Million Grant for First-Generation Underrepresented Students. Contribution to grant submission, for awarded $1.15 million grant for first-generation and underrepresented students. Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program. (Course team-taught with Nadja Cech: (‘How Do We Know What We Know? Epistemology, Methodology, and Interdisciplinary Research’) – article on grant award
- Greensboro News & Record article on Spectrum: UNCG group serves those on autism spectrum.
- Bridging the Gap - ongoing events to enhance student-police relations (flyer)
- Co-sponsor of events with Islamic Studies Research Network & Muslim Student Association (3 flyers)
- ‘Lunch with the Dean’ (weekly flyer)
- ‘Monday Play!’ (flyer)
- LIHC was co-sponsor of “Yes, and” collaboration with the Office of Intercultural Engagement around issues in UNCG’s LGBTQ+ community (April 5, 2017 flyer)
We first met at a new faculty orientation. Nodia had recently moved into a full-time Spanish-language teaching position at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and I serve as Dean of the Honors College at the university. Our connection was immediate given Nodia’s background as a Garifuna (a person of African and Native American descent from Central America) and my research on the history of the African Diaspora (Africans and their descendants across the world).

While most Garifunas (or Garinagu) live in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, many live in the United States. Substantial numbers live in New York, Los Angeles, and New Orleans, with handfuls living across North Carolina. Nodia grew up in Honduras and came to North Carolina with her family via New York. Garinagu like Nodia are part of the state’s ever-growing, culturally-rich communities of origins from around the world.

Guilford County’s diversity can be measured by the linguistic range in its public school system, where more than 150 languages are spoken by students (including English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, French, Urdu, Hindi, Lao, Thai, Hausa, Somali, Chinese, and Nepali)—let alone speakers of various Montagnard peoples and the descendants of Lumbee among other Native Americans. We have long been a home to indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, people on the move, and people looking to settle down.

Among the languages spoken in the Piedmont is Karif—the Garifuna language spoken by more than 200,000 people in Central and North America. The language, and all the concepts and modes of thinking and being that a particular language includes, is part of the linguistic mix of young and older people from across the world enriching Greensboro, Guilford County, and North Carolina as a whole. Along with their language, they bring their culinary traditions, spiritual practices, artistic sensibilities, philosophies, and stories. Among the Garifunas in the state are the visual artist Isidra Sabio.
in Raleigh and truck driver Ricky Gotay in Winston-Salem. And, of course, there is Nodia, who in addition to teaching Spanish at UNCG is emerging as an ambassador of Garifuna culture.

Nodia dances punta, an expressive musical-dance form among the Garifuna. While there are varying styles within punta, the dances primarily consist of circular hip movements while holding one's core upright—reminiscent of West African dances. Garifuna dancers move their feet to the sound of drums called garawon (pronounced 'gara-uhn'). The drums are usually played by a group of four men, with two playing the lead, 'la primera,' and two playing a deep, steady beat, 'la segunda,' that sounds and feels like a heartbeat. Over these rhythms, women sing lyrical songs of love, yearning, desire, betrayal, hope, and fear—a spectrum of feelings, images, and experiences that have been transmitted orally and through dance from one generation to the next. As Nodia explains, over the centuries, Garifunas and their descendants have collectively and creatively built and rebuilt their culture from the memories of those who preceded them. For Garinagu, punta not only helps them to express their feelings, it is also a way for them to learn and grow.

Punta has always been an essential part of Nodia's life. Every time she hears the music and every time she dances to it, she says she is transported to the warmest memories of her childhood—a magical time in her life. One of her favorite memories is dancing punta as a young child alongside her grandmother, mama. "I remember wearing a small red top and a wide flower-print skirt. It was 'La feria de San Juan,' [the San Juan festival], an annual event in 'el barrio Cristales' [the Cristales neighborhood]," she explains in Spanish. The festival gave everyone in town the opportunity to dress up and have a good time. "But while dancing as a child, I was oblivious to the history and significance of the event ... What made me happy was the fact that I was with mama, and for reasons I did not understand, or even question, the 'dun, dun' of the drums took hold of my body and soul," Nodia says with a big smile.

Growing up, punta was largely a source of joy for Nodia. However, once she began middle school and her body began to develop, becoming full-figured, the dance—which she performed in front of Garifuna and non-Garifuna alike—took on different connotations. As she remembers, non-Garifuna people began viewing her in a sexualized way. This made her uncomfortable, increasingly anxious, even scared while dancing punta. She began to fear non-Garifuna people coming from different communities who used to look at her as if she was “an exotic specimen created for the sole purpose of their entertainment.” She remembers, “It seemed as if all they expected of me was for me to shake my hips.” For some, her movements seemed to even provoke, as she put it, “the most ‘heretical’ visions in their minds.”

Nodia began to recoil emotionally. Her self-doubt increased when she realized there was not a single textbook that included information about the Garifuna. Teachers neither taught this history, nor was there any discussion of Garifuna culture as part of the national curriculum. Not even a mention. It was as if her heritage was not part of her country's history or culture. “This disconnect was traumatic and it used to make me feel as if I was invisible, insignificant, and an outsider,” she remembers. “Being that I would never be valued beyond exoticism in the mind of the non-Garifuna majority, I was compelled,” Nodia says, “to pursue my education and go somewhere—anywhere—I could express my full humanity.”

For many years, Nodia says she wondered whether mama ever felt the same way whenever she “joyfully, solemnly, or sensuously shook her gluteus maximus to the rhythm of the garawon!” If so, was dancing punta her coping mechanism? Unfortunately, mama is no
The Garifuna grew their communities in St. Vincent as well as neighboring island Dominica during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century—and they did so in the face of European aggression and colonization efforts. At times, however, Garifuna collaborated with French forces, against their shared enemy, the British. But the British were determined to subdue the rebels. They invested heavily in their wars and launched one after another attack. Over the course of several decades, the Garifunas repelled British incursions.

Expression of the battles they waged come in the form of the yankunu, a war dance performed by Garifuna men to this day. The specific dance depicts the ways in which men and women repelled and launched their own attacks on the British, while also mocking European slave owners. In yankunu, Garifuna men perform in women's dress, wearing skirts, with masks and feathered head-dresses—the latter signifying their indigenous origins—as well as cowry shells strapped above the knees for rhythmic effect. According to tradition Garifuna men disguised themselves as women hid arms under their dresses to get closer to British forces before attacking. For their part, enslaved Garifuna women on plantations hid male warriors, who attacked at night, when least suspected. In these ways, with drums beating and large sweeping movements by male dancers, yankunu is a reenactment of Garifuna's history of resistance and rebellion.

It took a century of warfare against the Garifunas for the British to finally defeat them. Launching a major offensive in the second of two protracted wars against the Garifuna—whose labor and land were sought for plantation agriculture but whose existence served as a beacon of resistance—the British took control of Garifuna strongholds. Many Garifuna were sent to the deserted island of Baliceaux in 1763, where many perished over the subsequent generation. Still, Garifuna resistance continued. Their final political demise came in 1796 following the death of the great Garifuna leader, Satuye (Joseph Chatoyer). Survivors were expelled and went Honduras, among other places on the Central American Caribbean coast.

"I don't know if mama, with a second-grade elementary school education, could have ever explained to me her most intimate thoughts about the harrowing experiences her ancestors endured," Nodia reflects. "Yet, I witnessed how she lived a life based on a deep sense of community that Garifunas first developed over two centuries ago." Cultivating a strong sense of community, Garifunas are grounded in their shared past: "The Garifuna international anthem, known as Yurumein," Nodia explains, "means ‘our homeland.’" "The anthem speaks to our resiliency as part of our history," she says. For instance, "it calls for the ‘leader to settle with the group at the first place where the sea connects with a river: Leimun shuluruty duna warubeite ñin ba bagurey bugura wabu.”

Whether at the “first place where the sea connects with a river;” up or down the coastline, or further inland, at Garifuna gatherings women dance punta, with call-and-response singing that recounts the time they journeyed from Saint Vincent to Honduras. "Now I understand why, for several years, mama allowed women to sharecrop at her farm in Mohaway [located in the northern part of Honduras]. I also understand why these women, and many others, gathered in my grandmother's kitchen to make casabe, a flat bread made from yucca (a white root with brown skin used in the Caribbean and West Africa alike)." The bonds between Garifuna women is strong, as was their respect for mama. Indeed, several members went so far as to build mama's kitchen in the collective spirit of Yurumein.

As Nodia notes, “even after 220 years we speak our own language, practice our own traditions, carry out our own rituals, cook our own types of food, and of course, continue to dance. We dance punta when we are happy and celebrate someone's birth, and we dance punta in a sorrowful way when someone dies. As I have come to understand, punta is our coping mechanism—a way for Garifunas to remember and continue to connect with each other and our history.”

The Garifuna's resistance to slavery, forced migration, cultural production, and resilience is part of a wider African diasporic experience that draws heavily upon dance, among other expressive, artistic forms, across the world: from the Siddis of Gujarat in India, the Kaffirs of...
Sirambadiya in Sri Lanka, to the Afrodescendientes in the Barrio de Malambo in Peru, to African Americans right here in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Garifuna leaders continue to gather at annual events across Central and North America. Most recently, from August 14-16, several thousand Garifunas attended an international conference held in Municipio de Tornabe, Honduras, celebrating their cultures, discussing their histories, and connecting and reconnecting with family, friends, and colleagues from across the region. Among the kaleidoscope of people in attendance, foods offered, costumes on display, and music performed, was punta.

As a distant daughter of rebel West Africans and Native Americans, Nodia is well aware of the role she plays in educating the larger public about the Garifuna; for my part, and beyond my scholarship on the African Diaspora, as the son of a Peruvian and East Indian parents whose families also lived under Spanish and British colonial rule, I feel close to Nodia and our historical connections to our families' respective pasts and to each other.

Nodia Mena, M.A., is Lecturer in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures in The College of Arts & Sciences at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Born in Honduras, Professor Mena is a Garifuna and a punta dancer.

Omar H. Ali, Ph.D., is Professor of Comparative African Diaspora History and Dean of Lloyd International Honors College at UNCG. Born in Peru, Dr. Ali is the 2016 Carnegie Foundation North Carolina Professor of the Year.
Impactful art series: Dr. Omar Ali

BY CAROLINIANWEB on JANUARY 13, 2016 • ( 0 )

Shannon Neu
A&E Editor

[Note from A&E Editor Shannon Neu: The arts, including music, dance, theatre, visual art and other art forms have likely affected your life in some capacity, either in school or in other aspects of day-to-day life. In the upcoming weeks, I am going to investigate how the lives of various members of the UNCG and Greensboro community have been impacted by the power of the arts. Each week I will feature a different individual and their stories of the role the arts have played in their lives.]

Dr. Omar Ali is an associate professor of Comparative African Diaspora History and the interim dean of the Lloyd International Honors College at UNCG. Last fall, he was named the 2016 Carnegie Foundation North Carolina Professor of the Year by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

Though Dr. Ali did not focus on a specific performing or visual art in school, he was introduced to arts through teachers, classmates and friends. These experiences helped him evolve his ways of thinking about the world around him. He considers this exposure to the arts to have been critical to his overall education.

Dr. Ali reflected on one of his most prominent memories of how the arts impacted his education.

“One of my former high school teachers, Dr. (Stanley) Scheinkopf, immediately comes to mind.” Dr Ali said. “Dr. Scheinkopf was one of my English teachers at Pasadena Polytechnic in
California. He was extraordinary. He tried to engage me and the class in the most creative and imaginative ways. You see, I was totally uninterested in Shakespeare, in literature, in reading (let alone writing) generally.

“I remember being barely awake in one of his classes, slouched in my chair. He came over to me, asked me to stand up and stab him in the gut with a pen he handed me. I was confused but certainly woke up. By him having me do this impromptu — as part of performing a scene from Hamlet or Macbeth, I can’t remember which one — I was forced to deal with the sudden reality of someone who was not going to let me remain passive.

“His willingness to engage me in such a bold and playful way impacted me profoundly. What an extraordinary pedagogical move on his part! His willingness to put himself out there, to do something that was even potentially dangerous to himself (after all, I was a high school kid with public license to stab his English teacher with a pen) was both alarming but so appreciated in hindsight.

“I hesitated, I remember, and he then took my hand with the pen and had me dig into him — so much so that I thought I/we might hurt him. But he was fearless. His risk-taking for the sake of teaching me continues to inspire me. I had never felt so given to by a teacher.”

Dr. Ali mentioned that performance is still an integral aspect of his life, including when he is teaching. “It’s part of what I often do in the classroom, in meetings, in the community and at home to help create more growthful and giving environments — ultimately more joyful learning environments,” he said.

He went on to explain how there are formal spaces, such as classrooms in which he teaches, or programs or projects that he leads, in which he has to perform. However, it’s in the non-formal settings — the in-between spaces, in the hallways, walking down the street, sitting on a plane — where performance (pretending, playing) is so vital.

“Shakespeare wrote ‘All the world’s a stage.’ This is how I experience the world — as performance spaces — or potential performance spaces,” Dr. Ali explained. “As children, we play, pretend and perform, actually quite easily. That’s how we learn, grow and become language speakers, for instance.

“As we get older, however, we are told to ‘stop playing around and get to work!’ We are trained (in the worst sense of the word) to ‘behave’ — which is very different than performing. Behaving is carrying out social roles in very narrow ways.

“There is little if any creativity in behaving (misbehaving is perhaps a creative, albeit not always helpful way of creating). Performing and play are creatively liberating (and tend to be
Dr. Ali believes that the arts are fundamental to education. "That is, if by education we mean learning and developing as human beings, not simply being able to regurgitate information," he added. "Much of formal learning in schools and in college is about acquiring knowledge as opposed to learning to become better learners."

Dr. Ali encourages members of the UNCG community to attend “Monday Play!” on any Monday at 12:15 p.m. in the Faculty Center and challenge themselves through playing and improvising.

The purpose of Monday Play is “in part, to have fun, and, as importantly, to learn how to become better players and improvisers — essential to becoming better at navigating, indeed transforming, the classroom, the workplace and our experiences with friends and family,” Dr. Ali said. “By becoming better at play and improvisation, we become more sophisticated and able to handle challenges, more resilient and better learners. How do we do this? By building on what others give us while providing leadership to those around us by modeling openness, care and joy. It’s a creative act.”
UNCG has received a 5-year, $1.15 million grant award from the U.S. Department of Education to support first-generation and underrepresented students in undergraduate research and graduate school preparation.

The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, one of eight federal TRIO programs, will serve promising UNCG students who are first-generation with financial need or members of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in research and advanced graduate studies. The first cohort of 25 undergraduate students will be selected this fall from each of the university’s colleges and schools.

UNCG is one of five universities in North Carolina to be selected for the program, and one of 161 institutions selected from across the country.

“The McNair grant will help UNCG deliver on our promise of providing both an opportunity to achieve and a path to excellence for our students,” said UNCG Chancellor Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. “Supporting these students in their preparation for and pursuit of graduate degrees will not only transform them as individuals, but will impact research and the generation of new knowledge. A more diverse research community leads to new ideas and perspectives, and that will fuel meaningful and exciting innovation and achievement.”

The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program was established in 1989 as a way to diversify academia by increasing the number of underrepresented students who earn PhDs. UNCG-McNair scholars will receive up to a $5,000 stipend and will participate in the McNair Summer Research Institute. Additionally, students will receive faculty mentoring, GRE test preparation and a summer course on research and writing. Students will have several opportunities to present their research at conferences across the country.

“The UNCG-McNair program is another example of how UNCG is setting the standard for student success,” said UNCG Provost Dana Dunn. “UNCG continues to prioritize what is most important: creating an environment that enables our students to maximize their potential and achieve their goals. This generous grant directly supports that objective. Our university is proud to be a leader when it comes to transforming the lives of students who come from traditionally underserved populations.”
The program is named in honor of Dr. Ronald Ervin McNair, an American physicist and astronaut, and the second African American to go to space. McNair was one of seven crew members who died during the launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger.

TAGS: Academics & Research, Grants, News,
Spectrum: UNC-Greensboro group serves those on autism spectrum

Story by Robert C. Lopez, Special to the News & Record   Mar 5, 2017

People with Asperger’s syndrome, Nils Skudra said, do want to make friends. They do want to make connections, and contrary to misperceptions, many have. They may just not always know how. A graduate student at UNC-Greensboro, Skudra recently helped found an organization at the school for students on the autism spectrum. “A lot of people who don’t fully understand what being on the spectrum entails, may think of it as a handicap,” Skudra said. “That can lead to some marginalization. ... I want people to realize that being on the spectrum is not a handicap. But there are a lot of Asperger’s people who have social challenges.”

The group, called Spectrum at UNCG, had its first meeting last semester and has attracted about a half-dozen to a dozen students to each of its gatherings.

Skudra, 24, enrolled at UNCG last year to study Civil War history. He is doing an internship at the Greensboro History Museum, researching Guilford County’s World War I veterans. He also volunteers at Guilford Courthouse National Military Park. Recently, he was one of four students with Asperger’s chosen to receive a scholarship from KFM Making a Difference, a nonprofit organization that promotes disability awareness.

People with Asperger’s have trouble picking up on social cues and trouble with nonverbal communications. The condition is one of several forms of autism.

“Being on the spectrum, it entails having certain social difficulties,” Skudra said. “It’s challenging making small talk with other people, making eye contact, just hanging out.”

According to the Autism Society of North Carolina, about 60,000 people in North Carolina are on the autism spectrum. Nationally, about 1.5 million are on the spectrum.

And in spite of their uneasiness with social interactions, many of those are looking to form close relationships.

“It’s not that they don’t want to be social,” said Judy Smithmyer, a resource specialist at the Autism Society of North Carolina. “There are certainly folks who prefer to be non-social, but for the most part, people on the spectrum are trying to seek out social opportunities. But because they have differences in understanding social boundaries and cues, they have difficulty with that.”

A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, Skudra was given a diagnosis of Asperger’s when he was 10.

“My mom was shocked and frightened about it at first,” he said. “The doctors at that point didn’t really know much about Asperger’s, and they said I might have to be institutionalized.”

But in high school, he learned more about the condition and began attending social-skills groups. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, he connected with some local autism groups.

“So I had a good support network in Berkeley,” he said. “But coming here, we found there’s not much for adults on the spectrum.”

His mother, Renee Skudra, who lives with him in a house near the UNCG campus, said they did find a local program run by the UNC School of Medicine but were told he would have to be put on a potentially years-long waiting list for services. Several other programs were aimed toward young children.

“In Berkeley, they have organizations that offer workshops, employment help, speakers, all kinds of stuff,” Skudra’s mother said. “But here, there’s no place like that to go.”

At UNCG, Skudra met history professor Omar Ali.

“I talked with him about being an autism student and about the support network I had in Berkeley,” Skudra said. “And he was interested in helping me start an autism student organization here at UNCG.”

Ali, who now serves as the faculty adviser for the group, said he wasn’t an autism expert but wanted to help Skudra and others on the spectrum “have a space.”

“There was a need to create some kind of place where people could just come together and be among like-minded people,” Ali said. “I think this is something that’ll be beneficial not just to this campus, but other campuses in the area. We’ve already gotten interest from other campuses, like Greensboro College.”

Asperger’s is not a debilitating condition, Spectrum vice president and UNCG sophomore Andi Jones said, noting that many students who have Asperger’s do well academically. But having a lack of community, she said, can lead to anxiety and depression.

“And we wind up isolating ourselves and not being the best people that we can be,” Jones said. “It can be very lonely, and that can cause much bigger issues in the long term.”

Skudra said he hopes to promote the group throughout the Triad, as well as do away with the stigma some people associate with being on the autism spectrum.

“Starting next semester, I’d like to do more organized activities, some fundraisers for autism awareness,” he said. “But we just want to grow, make more connections.”

“Really we want this to be for everyone, expand to include people’s family members, partners, anyone interested in finding support,” Renee Skudra said. “It’s about creating a community.”
BRIDGING THE GAP

Workshop & Conversation

FACULTY CENTER

MONDAY, APRIL 24, 2017

12:14PM-1:00PM

An opportunity to enhance student-policce relations

Contact psac@uncg.edu for more information
Protest and Resistance in Iraq and Iran

Tuesday, September 19
EUC Maple Room, 5-6 p.m.

A book panel discussion with authors:

Dr. Negar Mottahedeh (Duke University)
#iranelection: hashtag solidarity and the transformations of online life

Ali Issa (War Resisters League)
Against all Odds: Voices of Popular Struggle in Iraq

With Prof. Ali Askarov (Peace and Conflict Studies) and Prof. Jerry Pubantz (Political Science).

Co-sponsors: Humanities Network and Consortium (HNAC), Peace and Conflict Studies, Religious Studies, Lloyd International Honors College, and the Muslim Student Association. With support from the International Program Center Kohler Fund.

For more information, please contact Dr. Asa Eger at aeger@uncg.edu
we have adorned everything on earth

Saba Taj
Artist Exhibit and Talk
Gatewood Gallery, Gatewood Studio Art Building
Thurs., September 28th, 5:00-6:00 pm

An exhibit of mixed-media works imagining apocalypse and liberation.

Co-sponsored by: Islamic Studies Research Network, Religious Studies, Lloyd International Honors College, International Programs Center Kohler Fund, and the Muslim Student Association
Transcultural & Multiconfessional Connections in the First Global Age:

Dr. Amélia Polónia da Silva
Visiting Scholar on Erasmus Exchange from Universidade de Porto
November 16th, 4:00-5:00 Ferguson 100

Co-sponsors:

Islamic Studies Research Network
Department of History
Lloyd Honors College
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
LUNCH WITH
THE DEAN

WEDNESDAYS
AT 11:30

LOCATED IN FOUNTAIN VIEW BISTRO (ACROSS FROM THE PIZZA STATION)

presented by LIHC
Monday Play!

Faculty Center
Mondays at 12:14
(and 42 seconds)

The World's a Stage!
UNCG Office of Intercultural Engagement presents a collaboration:

"Yes, and"

An interactive and performative conversation around issues in UNCG's LGBTQ+ community

Wednesday, April 5, 2017
6:00-7:00pm
Location: Office of Intercultural Engagement

Light refreshments served!

For Questions contact: Tiera Moore at tcmoore@uncg.edu
Lloyd International Honors College and the Office of Intercultural Engagement join forces to offer a new and exciting performative conversation, using the guidelines of "Yes and" to discuss challenges unique to the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community on and around UNCG's campus.

"Yes, And" uses the experiential learning styles of Performance, Improv & Play, practiced in Lloyd International Honors College, to develop strategies that positively build on contributions from others' active participation. In a low stakes and supportive space, students can stretch themselves by trying out new roles and approaches.