Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: As our world becomes more diverse, it's important to make diversity and inclusion part of everyday culture. To this end, Missouri State University hosts the annual Collaborative Diversity Conference (CDC) on campus to promote the inclusion of diversity in our community. The theme for this year's conference is, “Bridging the Cultural Divides. It will take place April 24th to 26th in the Plaster Student Union. I'm Emily Yeap.

Joining me today to discuss the conference is Wes Pratt, chief diversity officer at Missouri State.

Wes Pratt: What we're trying to do is to broaden perspectives about the inclusion of diversity, and why it's important to value inclusion. We define diversity very broadly. And a lot of times, if you ask somebody about diversity, they may have their own concept or precept. Some people may think it's quotas, or it's preferences for minority groups, or something like that. But when we look at it, we look at it as the individual and group social differences that we bring to the pursuit of higher education. And so, we know we have to be intentional as we engage one another across our individual differences, and our individual differences may be personality, learning styles, and life experiences, as well as our group social differences, which might be race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, abilities, disabilities. But even our political, religious and or affiliation, such as veteran status and socioeconomic status. So, we want folks to understand that everyone, as we look in the public sector, business and corporate, private and higher education, we have to be prepared to engage one another across these individual groups social differences.

We live in a global society, a global economy. The nation, as we know it, is rapidly changing. That gives people pause. That may be challenging, and create some apprehension in some folks. But we need not be apprehensive about the fact that our world is becoming even more diverse. We simply have to start becoming more culturally conscious, culturally competent, and learn how to negotiate those cross cultural differences. Because the reality is, we're all a part of our humanity. And that's key. We have more in common than we have differences. But unfortunately historically, and sometimes politically, people play to the divisiveness or the polarization based on our differences. And so the conference tends to promote those efforts that are inclusive, that manifest itself in our core value of inclusive excellence. And we're excited to sponsor this signature event, and we look forward to folks from all across the community and the state coming to participate.

Emily Yeap: The theme was chosen to address the divisive climate in America today.

Wes Pratt: As we look and see what's going on nationally, and sometimes locally, and even in communities, there's such divisiveness and polarization that sort of permeates just about everything that we do now. People can't agree to agree civilly. So, we want to bridge those cultural divides and create opportunities where people can engage one another. And the conference seeks to do that.

Emily Yeap: This year's plenary speaker is Professor Irshad Manji, an author and founder of the Moral Courage Project.

Wes Pratt: I find the plenary speaker to be probably one of the most exciting and intellectually stimulating people that I've met. I first met Professor Irshad Manji at a conference about two years ago. She presented on the Moral Courage Project. It was a powerful presentation. She actually had showcased a moral courage documentary that actually dealt with bringing two sides together. One was the Black Lives Matter leadership, as well as those who believe in promoting the Confederate Flag. And so, how she engaged those people and worked with them so they found some common ground. They may not have agreed in the final analysis on some issues, but at the end of the session, they had valued each other's perspectives, and understood the issues on both sides of the fence. We're honored that she's going to be with us for three days.

Emily Yeap: Another highlight is the presentation on diversity and inclusion initiatives in Columbia, Missouri.

Wes Pratt: They've been working to promote inclusive excellence across their community. They have created an inclusive excellence model that I'd like to really replicate in this community. So we have Nikki Magruder coming in from Columbia to share with us the vision for that community and what they've done.

Emily Yeap: On April 24th, there will be a pre-conference workshop on “Facing racism in 2019 and beyond” through the Facing Racism Institute. Conference registration is online and the price is $250. The pre-conference cost is $150. To get more details, visit diversity.missouristate.edu/conference. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.