



Communities of Practice: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

STRENGTHENING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed every sector of our global community. One of the many consequences of COVID-19 is an unveiling of the degree to which there are pervasive, structural racial inequities in all sectors of the United States, including in higher education, where students and communities of color continue to face issues with equal access to post-secondary education. If higher education is to make good on its promise of intergenerational mobility and opportunity, we must address these racial equity gaps.

In May 2020, the American Council on Education (ACE) pioneered a community of practice around diversity, equity, and inclusion in the era of COVID-19. This community of practice, led by ACE and Taffye Benson Clayton, associate provost and vice president for inclusion and diversity at Auburn University, brings together leaders from the higher education community across the country to work together to explore and document how institutions can ensure issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are front and center as our country moves forward. This document is part of a series created by members of the community of practice. The content, themes, and resources that are included in this piece stem from work the community carried out over the course of several months following the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

STRENGTHENING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Prepared for the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Community of Practice by:

Floyd Cheung, *Vice President for Equity and Inclusion, Professor of English, Smith College*

Leah Cox, *Vice President for Inclusion and Institutional Equity, Towson University*

Shiva Darbandi, *Director of the Joanne Waxman Library and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisor, Maine College of Art*

Lorna Hernandez Jarvis, *Chief Diversity Officer and Associate Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Whitworth University*

Patricia K. Kinney, *Assistant Dean of Diversity and Inclusion, Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law*

Alaina M.T. Macaulay, *Executive Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Marcine Pickron-Davis, *Chief Diversity and Community Relations Officer, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine*

More institutions of higher learning are recognizing not only the necessity of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on campus, but also the complexity inherent in implementing DEI-related goals. At the same time, COVID-19 has illuminated many of our societal ills, particularly as waves of outbreaks hit colleges and universities. When many campuses shifted to remote learning this past spring and closed residence halls and dining centers, college and university presidents faced the reality of student homelessness and food insecurity, issues that were exacerbated for many students due to COVID-19. As remote learning continues, campus leaders are grappling with students' access to technology as well as their heightened anxieties and mental health issues, which are [more severe for already marginalized students](#).

To help address these challenges, ACE convened a DEI community of practice—campus leaders that coalesce the current thinking and best practice around these issues, from a variety of perspectives. Truly embracing DEI requires a holistic approach to create an environment that is safe, welcoming, and equitable to every member of the campus community. Community of practice members developed recommendations that address this broad need for change and focus on centering DEI in all facets of an institution's work.

FUND DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION ON CAMPUS

Too many institutions do not have the full commitment of resources necessary to be successful. While many institutions claim to focus on DEI, fewer than half of the chief diversity officers surveyed by [Witt/Kieffer in 2016](#) reported that they “were given adequate resources to perform [their] duties.” Keep in mind the significant work that institutions give their diversity practitioners: interface with the community, respond to bias incidents, create programs, interpret First Amendment challenges, and create an overall culture shift.

While the case for advancing DEI is compelling, efforts may flounder as the impact of COVID-19 ravages institutional budgets. Nonetheless, investing in DEI now will position an institution to address long-term enrollment and revenue challenges. DEI work, when matched with the appropriate resources, does not just benefit underrepresented and marginalized groups; its benefits reach the entire institution in the form of a more welcoming campus community for all students. Additionally, research shows that students in environments where diversity is woven through the curriculum and co-curriculum [have more sophisticated cognitive and affective abilities](#) as well as [community involvement and interest in the public good](#) than students educated in homogeneous postsecondary environments.

Ultimately, prioritizing and fully funding DEI efforts will benefit the institution, its students, and society.

CENTER DEI IN CORE VALUES

With institutional backing and full funding, a campus is positioned to rethink and, more importantly, do the work of centering DEI in the institution's core values.

Administrators, faculty, and staff must showcase institutional priorities through their mission, vision, and value statements. Moreover, leaders must be able to do more than just understand and articulate the importance of DEI. To advance toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, campus leaders must place these values at the center of their mission, vision, and value statements, not position them as an added value.

A practical way to center DEI in the work of the institution is to focus on teaching and learning. If the central mission of colleges and universities is to educate students, then DEI should be central to the pedagogy of every professor, the values of every department, and the curricula across the institution. Teaching and learning centers can assist with this goal. Over 1,269 institutions already have established a center, according to the [POD Network](#). While these centers will never be a panacea, they can act as administrative levers to create more equitable and inclusive teaching and learning environments for all students. For example, they can cultivate a culture of continuous teaching improvement via their programming, advise professors via one-on-one consultation, form learning communities, and participate in institution-wide decisions related to teaching and learning.

Another specific recommendation is to embed DEI in the strategic plan, which impacts curriculum, funding, scholarships, hiring, retention, recruitment, evaluation, promotion, assignment of work, communications, and accessibility. The strategic plan process is generally stakeholder-centric. By listening to a variety and diversity of stakeholders, a plan can be created that has support from leadership and constituents while avoiding systems and processes that negatively impact populations.

INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS

Indeed, the day-to-day work of centering DEI is accomplished by individuals both inside and outside the institution.

Leadership

Institutions should place DEI leaders in the president's cabinet and appoint a high-level DEI committee. Doing so gives DEI leaders autonomy and keeps the president abreast of DEI-related issues on campus and in the greater community. It also gives DEI leaders a seat at the table during important conversations among the president, the board of trustees, and other senior leaders.

Faculty

Faculty governance plays an important role in ensuring that DEI initiatives reach all levels of an institution. Faculty leaders should collaborate with the DEI expert on campus and other members of leadership through clearly defined lines of communication and measurable, yet evolving, goals. From curriculum planning to recruitment and hiring of new faculty, faculty leaders can proactively identify issues and research solutions.

Staff

Staff members often exist outside the regulated world of academic affairs, granting them greater agency to act as contributors to change at their institution. Staff governing boards can work to provide guidance to fellow staff, incentivize change, and contribute to the institution's reporting and accountability efforts.

Students

On many campuses, students are the primary driver of DEI work. Most frequently, students share their concerns to the student affairs office, but institutions will see better results if students are empowered to participate directly as part of the DEI committee or a similar body. Doing so gives students opportunities to see decision-making in action and have their voices heard.

Trustees

An informed and dedicated board is essential to centering DEI work at an institution, as well as holding the president and leadership accountable for fostering meaningful and lasting change. As a first step, institutions may offer DEI training to current members of the board. Training will provide both essential knowledge and a shared vocabulary with which members will be able to contribute to and discuss DEI-driven missions and values statements.

Accrediting bodies

Accreditation recognizes the centrality of diversity, equity, and inclusion to student success and to the ability to address equity gaps. Evidence of this recognition is shown by the inclusion in the accreditation processes of using disaggregated data, analyzing it to implement changes, and requesting the reporting of programs and initiatives designed to address equity gaps. The recommendations made by the accrediting bodies go beyond the equity lens in student success by also addressing equity gaps among staff and faculty and overall campus climate.

COVID-19 has illuminated the impact of social inequities on our campuses, increasing the need to prioritize DEI work, even as leaders grapple with public health and budget challenges. The diversity, equity, and inclusion community of practice encourages all campuses to address these issues *now*—not only will it ease the disproportionate burden placed on underrepresented populations during the pandemic, but it will also position the institution to flourish in the future.