BECOMING PART OF THE SOLUTION:

Building diverse, equitable and inclusive learning environments

Higher education’s unique opportunity to advance equality, inspire peace, and promote understanding — in 10 steps
“Just look at what’s happening socially in our world today,” said Sharron Gatling, assistant director of equal opportunity at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. “We have a difficult time just being able to be human and engage with one another. Are we inadvertently supporting problematic gender, racial or social issues? We have an awesome opportunity in higher education to be part of the solution.”

The opportunity that Sharron cites — solving generations-old struggles to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion — can be a difficult journey, but the rewards far outweigh the efforts. In higher education alone, research shows that campus diversity benefits all students and employees by encouraging higher levels of academic achievement, improving intergroup relations, driving innovation and creativity, and more.1

PeopleAdmin spoke with experts on diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education to identify how colleges and universities can advance equality, inspire peace and promote understanding on campus. Below, you’ll find facts, insights and actionable steps to help you take advantage of higher education’s unique opportunity to enrich academia and support progress.

Nancy Aebersold, founder and executive director of the Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC), said the reason why the topic needs to be discussed in higher education is because a diversity of perspectives creates “a more energized and dynamic academic environment.”

“People with different life experiences ask different questions,” Nancy said. “They enrich dialogs and may ignite contestation or disruption of the status quo, which fuels the creation of new knowledge, innovation and deeper understandings.”

Many institutions employ DEI initiatives to attract students and employees from various cultures, religions and backgrounds. These initiatives aim to balance students’ exposure to individuals who are like them with those who have different perspectives and experiences — all in a safe, welcoming environment. Colleges and universities generally deem DEI programs successful when they achieve a certain percentage of representation from various minority groups.

But this leads to a common, unintended effect: Once programs are implemented, leaders tend to focus on diversity enrollment and employment rates, and therefore lose sight of opportunities to advance knowledge, justice and peace by building diverse, equitable and inclusive learning environments.

For example, during discussions with representatives from about 20 U.S. colleges and universities, 75 percent mentioned diversity hiring as a challenge or priority at their institution, yet only 20 percent acknowledged diversity in the context of student achievement.2 To contribute to a more just, equitable society, higher education institutions must not lose sight of the important roles they play.
Choose to confront inequality, discrimination and civil unrest at your institution

“Diversity is one of the most serious, complex, and nuanced topics in higher education today, and as the U.S. population continues to diversify, the necessity of improving diversity, equity and inclusion to meet the mission of colleges and universities multiplies,” said Nancy, whose nonprofit consortium of colleges, universities, hospitals, research labs, government agencies, and related organizations helps higher education institutions hire diverse and talented faculty, staff and executives.

Education has historically played a critical role in uniting people to end discrimination, marginalization and prejudice. By fulfilling that role today — as racial, religious, sexual and gender inequality tensions rise — higher education institutions can pave the way to justice and equality for all.

But to create a dynamic, safe environment for people from all backgrounds and beliefs to learn, share and experience diverse perspectives, higher education institutions must do more than recruit diverse students and employees. Institutions can build diverse, equitable and inclusive campus environments by first understanding DEI, then assessing their unique campus climate, and seeking tools and partnerships that empower DEI goals.

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle — the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.
Know how to define diversity, equity and inclusion

Diversity, equity and inclusion are closely related and often discussed together, but each term has its own meaning and place on college and university campuses.

**Diversity** refers to individual differences — such as personality, learning styles, and life experiences — and group or social differences, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, ability, cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations.³

Nancy adds: “Diversity is defined very broadly. Diversity is diversity of thought, or diversity in terms of class — where your class background might have come from. It could be your race or your ethnicity, your sexual orientation, your gender. We all bring something to the table in terms of diversity.”

**Equity** describes the creation of opportunities for historically underrepresented populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that are capable of closing the achievement gaps in student success and completion.⁴

**Inclusion** is the term used to describe the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity to increase one’s awareness, knowledge and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions. These engagements may occur between people and educational curriculum or intellectual, social, cultural or geographical communities.⁵

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Understand why diversity, equity and inclusion are important

College and university leaders must recognize that creating diverse, equitable and inclusive campus environments is about more than meeting minority hiring goals. Done correctly, it’s a process that can improve our society as a whole — starting with students.

“Diversity in faculty is important because of diversity in our student body,” said Matthew Finn, assistant director of faculty administration at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. “It’s part of the college experience, part of education. Immersing students in a diverse world, diverse ideas, and difficult conversations in the classroom brings forward personal experiences from different backgrounds. So does having a faculty member with whom a student can relate to and learn from.”

Nancy agreed. “Diversity, equity and inclusion are important because students benefit from seeing themselves mirrored in the front of the classroom, in the lab and in the highest levels of leadership. Diverse representation and inclusive learning environments provide inspiration and aspiration and help students believe ‘I can be there or I can achieve thought leadership in the profession I choose.’”

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Assess your campus climate

Once the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion is understood, institutions should assess the current state of DEI in every department.

Nancy suggests senior leadership and heads of each department and school begin establishing this baseline by answering these six questions:

1. Has your institution/department/school made a formal and transparent commitment to DEI?
2. Has it ratified DEI in its institutional policies?
3. Has it implemented DEI practices in its operations and practices?
4. Has it employed DEI language and imagery in internal and external communications?
5. Has it created accessible mandatory and elective training and development on DEI for all members of the campus community?
6. Has it established accountability measures to monitor DEI in all of the above areas?
Analyze DEI performance using existing data

Higher education leaders can analyze existing data to determine whether they’re presenting students with a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives in classrooms. A DEI analysis can use whatever data are on hand to identify trends and insights, including but not limited to student or employee voluntary demographic information, student surveys, or employee exit interviews.

“We used data in our applicant tracking system to see where diversity was breaking down, and we actually found that we were losing minority employees faster than we could hire them,” said Demetrius Bynes, director of employment services at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. “By taking a real, analytical look at our data, we could tell we really needed to work on our ability to retain diverse employees.”

Institutions should also review task force and search committee processes to ensure a broad representation of perspectives.

“It’s important to make sure we incorporate as much diversity as possible into our processes,” said Sharron of William & Mary. “Who’s truly represented in our committees and task forces? Do we have minorities on there? Do we have enough women on there? Do we have people from the LGBT community on there to get the holistic perspective of what’s happening within our universities, our organizations, and what we can do better?

“Without those perspectives,” she said, “we’re not going to be the leaders in the field. We can’t because we’re missing elements, we’re missing thoughts, we’re missing information.”
Build your equitable, inclusive environments to benefit students ... and higher education

“A large barrier to achieving the goals of having a diverse faculty and staff that reflects what our students look like is we’re not producing enough Ph.D.s,” Nancy said. “There aren’t enough women in science, technology, engineering, and math. There aren’t enough minorities in those fields, so sometimes this is somewhat field-specific, but it’s a supply and demand issue. We’re not creating the supply to meet the demand that’s there.”

To overcome this challenge, students from historically excluded populations must pursue doctorate degrees, and a number of organizations exist to recruit students for this purpose. But Nancy says that’s not enough.

“Think about this as a pipeline: How can we build the pipeline of people who take the next step as students to get into higher education and think about the professoriate or the academy as a career destination?”

The answer, she says, is by building equitable, inclusive campus environments where diverse students’ and employees’ ideas and contributions are welcomed and valued. But that requires major changes from college and university faculty, staff and leadership.

“There is a knowledge gap that needs to be filled by ‘educating the educators’ about barriers to inclusion,” Nancy said. She further explained that internalized “isms” and “phobias” can lead to hate crimes, campus violence, subtle prejudice, unconscious bias, and stereotyping.

Once students and employees view higher education institutions as places where they are welcomed and valued, the promised benefits of DEI will be realized. These men and women will reach higher levels of academic achievement, strengthen intergroup relations, innovate and explore creatively — and many of them will pursue careers in higher education so they can continue following those passions.

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Address systemic DEI challenges

Once assessments are complete, institutions must act on what DEI assessments uncover — either by praising equitable, inclusive practices, or by modifying existing processes to embrace DEI.

At Georgia Southern, the HR team uncovered a retention disparity among minority employees. Once the team reviewed employee surveys and exit interviews to find the cause, it discovered that employees with disabilities were significantly less likely to feel they had sufficient opportunities for promotion and growth than nondisabled employees.

Demetrius and his team worked to improve this by first focusing on professional development for new hires with disabilities. Demetrius coached managers and established a clear pathway for these employees to move from temporary positions to permanent positions, largely through mentorship and professional development. By focusing on the cause of turnover for this population, Demetrius was able to significantly improve retention of Georgia Southern’s disabled workforce.

“What we’re doing now is keeping our workforce diverse and helping them be more successful in their jobs,” Demetrius said. “We’re working toward a better future.”

Here are some ideas to help institutions address diversity breakdowns:

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<th>Diversity breakdown:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Diverse candidates get eliminated during the selection</td>
<td>• Examine the inclusion and diversity activities of your search committees or interviewers. We are all more likely to hire people who look and sound like us, so keep diversity top of mind when developing a search committee.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diverse candidates reject your offers</td>
<td>• Address bias in the interview process by offering bias training or recruiting diverse committees.</td>
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<tr>
<td>High turnover rate among diverse employees</td>
<td>• Explore the interactions between candidates and university employees with a keen eye toward unintentional, possibly marginalizing micro-messages. Determine when and where coaching and training may make a positive impact.</td>
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<td>• Assess during exit interviews why candidates are leaving. Do they feel unsupported? Excluded? Misunderstood? Identify the core reasons they’re leaving and address them head-on.</td>
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Partner with DEI-specific organizations within higher education

Though recruiting diverse students falls mostly on the shoulders of staff, alumni and volunteers, several professional organizations focus solely on assisting with diversity hiring within higher education.

The Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC) and DirectEmployers Association are two organizations that empower HR professionals and faculty affairs departments to conduct inclusive searches and ensure the cultural competence of their workforces to enhance student success. The organizations also provide resources to assist with improving DEI on campus, including job boards that attract hundreds of thousands of diverse visitors each month.

“She also recommends an organization called NCORE, the National Conference on Race & Ethnicity in American Higher Education, which has resources for recruiting and retaining faculty and staff, influencing campus climates, and breaking down barriers between different campus units to get everybody on board with diversity initiatives.

Institutions looking to fill specific diversity gaps in their workforces may also consider posting open positions on sites that reach targeted audiences. This might include diversity.jobs, easterseals.com, vets.gov/employment, deaf2work.jobs, diversityworking.com, and employdiversity.com.

PeopleAdmin, The Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC), and DirectEmployers Association have partnered to assist higher education institutions in sourcing more qualified, diverse candidates.

This partnership makes it easier for HERC member colleges and universities using SelectSuite to perform inclusive searches which focus on attracting candidates that more accurately reflect the diversity of the student population. Through this partnership, SelectSuite users’ open positions are automatically posted to the diversity job boards listed above.

can share with all of your faculty and staff members. You can do ‘lunch and learns’, where you collectively view a webinar and have meaningful discussions about DEI with your colleagues on campus.”
Expand employees’ understanding and facilitation of your DEI efforts

Partnering with these groups can help build the pipeline of diverse candidates, but hiring managers, academic affairs departments and search committee participants must learn how to take up the DEI banner, too.

“We are constantly working on initiatives to educate our faculty on diversity, equity and inclusion,” Matthew of Emerson College said. “When it comes to our faculty search process, we have mandatory search committee training. Our vice president of Diversity and Inclusion is also brought into the process to review plans for everything from advertising to hiring. Just to have someone there who’s an expert on DEI, to help oversee the process, has been enormously helpful.”

As it is with students, communication is key to facilitating successful training with college or university employees.

“Talk about biases and stereotypes,” Sharron said. “We are human, so we all have them. But talk about those things and how that interferes with the learning process, recruiting process and hiring process — have open conversations and dialogue. We can’t move forward if we’re scared to talk about the elephant that’s in the room. We have sessions throughout the year so people can talk openly.”

“Ultimately diversity is everyone’s responsibility,” Nancy adds, “so it’s important to get involved and make time in your schedule to join, participate, and learn.”

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Invest in technology to empower DEI initiatives and simplify reporting

Much like partnering with diversity-focused organizations, making use of today’s talent management technology plays an essential role in effectively reaching, recruiting, hiring and developing the most diverse and qualified faculty, staff and senior executives. It’s also a key to effective reporting.

“We work in concert with human resources, and one of the biggest challenges around compliance of equal opportunity federal regulations is data — making sure that the data are properly stored in a timely manner, based on our local and state regulations,” said Sharron, who uses PeopleAdmin’s SelectSuite® talent management solution.

“I’ve set up my SelectSuite reporting so I just click a button, change my date filters, and there it is,” she said.

PeopleAdmin’s SelectSuite is an integrated talent management solution designed specifically for higher education. The cloud-based solution provides essential tools for meeting diversity hiring goals and reporting compliance — such as verifying data on candidate referral sources, aggregating demographic reports by requisition or job title, reporting on the stage each candidate reaches in a search, and much more.

SelectSuite integrates with job boards — including LinkedIn, HERC and many of the diversity-focused job sites listed above — to simplify position description management and inclusive searching while delivering a seamless experience for applicants.

The powerful analytics tools in SelectSuite also help institutions monitor talent management progress, which Sharron and her team at William & Mary use to continuously improve processes.

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“I care about when one area has a turnover,” she said. “What’s the problem? Is it something that I am doing? Is it something that the institution is doing to cause people to leave the university? We don’t want that.”

And like Demetrius at Georgia Southern, Sharron uses data in SelectSuite to identify turnover trends and their causes. “We want this to be a great working environment for all of us, and being able to go back to the data and say, ‘This particular area keeps having all this turnover. What is happening?’ helps us achieve that.”

She also uses diversity hiring data to collaborate with team members to achieve a common goal.

“Part of the goal of diversity, equity and inclusion is to get to a point where we can work together and thrive,” Sharron said. “There are often situations in which I can help you reach your goals and you can help me reach mine. Having that data gives me the opportunity to be proactive about what’s happening in our workforce and reach out.”

Making a lasting impact

Though technology is one of the many tools institutions need to create diverse, equitable and inclusive environments for students and employees, no tool alone delivers the many benefits of a diverse, equitable and inclusive campus. Before technology, assessments or partnerships can empower DEI initiatives, college and university leaders at all levels — from students to faculty to school leaders — must commit to uniting behind a shared vision of higher education’s role in promoting progress toward diversity, equity and inclusion.

“We have to believe there’s a better way forward,” Nancy said. “You have to make space for everyone at the table. The critical work is bringing in the people who might be skeptical, or they might not see the business case for diversity, or they might not hold that as an aspirational place to go. But really understanding their viewpoints and where they’re coming from is just as much part of the diversity and inclusion equation as anyone else’s perspective.”

In addition to bringing everyone to the table, Nancy says DEI practices must become part of the fabric of institutions, not just an annual initiative or report.

“It’s important to adopt these practices and institutionalize them so that it’s just part of the way we do business in higher education,” she said. “And we’re on our way. Higher education is on its way, and it’s very inspirational for me to see the impact that institutions are making.”

PeopleAdmin has spent more than 15 years partnering with hundreds of higher education institutions to help find, hire and develop the most qualified educators, employees and leaders. To learn more about how PeopleAdmin’s suite of talent management solutions empowers diversity, increased efficiency, streamlined onboarding, simplified reporting, faculty recruiting and search committee management, visit PeopleAdmin.com.

2 PeopleAdmin customer interviews, June 22-24, 2016.
3 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)
4 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)
5 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)