

## Lower Columbia College Faculty Listening Sessions on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – October 2023

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### Background

In summer 2023, the consultant was approached by Lower Columbia College (LCC) to assist with the development and conduct of listening sessions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at the college. This work is designed to support and add depth to the college's existing equity work.

In collaboration with LCC's Vice President of Effectiveness & College Relations, the consultant drafted a list of questions for the faculty DEI listening sessions using questions employed in previous, similar efforts, and that appeared to provide the colleges with insightful, actionable responses. The questions were reviewed, and a final protocol was developed to include information for session participants about the purpose of the listening sessions as well as expectations regarding confidentiality and participation.

The college organized the listening sessions internally, inviting all faculty to participate. Faculty who indicated an interest were put on a list, provided with a Zoom link, and reminded about their session a few days prior.

This report includes responses from three virtual listening sessions conducted on October 21<sup>st</sup> (1 session) and October 27<sup>th</sup> (2 sessions). Each session was conducted via Zoom using the same protocol. All participants consented to having the session recorded. Notes were taken from those recordings for one session; a notetaker employed by the consultant attended the other two sessions. A total of 21 faculty participated in the listening sessions.

Responses to each of the 6 questions included in the listening session protocol are summarized below. While the responses are summarized and edited for clarity, the summaries reflect the words and phrasing used by the participants as much as is practical. The summary of question responses is followed by a brief overview and observations.

Note that it is possible that the overall perceptions of Lower Columbia College's campus climate and DEI initiatives might vary from the opinions offered by faculty during these listening sessions. The college is encouraged to continue these discussions along with other DEI efforts to further develop understanding of DEI at Lower Columbia College.

### **Question #1: What does it mean for you to have a diverse and inclusive workplace?**

Faculty participants described a diverse and inclusive workplace as one that embraces individuals with varied backgrounds, values, and beliefs, accepting everyone for who they are. This inclusivity extends beyond visible differences, encouraging a multitude of voices and perspectives. It was suggested that “diversity is not limited to visual distinctions, but also encompasses diverse approaches and contributions,” acknowledging that there are multiple, sometimes unconventional, ways to showcase knowledge and skills. The faculty participants emphasized the importance of providing what each individual needs and advocated for the expansion of diversity to include “intersectionality.”

Faculty also observed that in an institution committed to diversity, efforts are made to research and evaluate outcomes (such as student success rates), and to adapt practices and methods for better results. They suggest that such an institution recognizes and respects the different paths individuals take to reach common goals, challenging the notion that student success follows a uniform trajectory. Inclusivity and diversity are seen by faculty as sources of celebration and joy, where all students are honored regardless of preconceived assumptions or expectations.

The faculty suggested that fostering an environment where diverse opinions are welcomed, and self-censorship is discouraged, is a hallmark of a college committed to DEI. Such a workplace encourages honesty, openness, and transparency; fosters an environment where opposing perspectives are valued, and passionate opinions are respected; and allows for and encourages open dialogue and respectful disagreement without fear of disrespect. It promotes an atmosphere where everyone is accepted for who they are, and individuals are not judged based on their backgrounds or other characteristics.

The faculty participants also indicated that, in addition to race and gender, inclusion encompasses a broad range of perspectives, and ensures that everyone has a seat at the table. Representation was seen as essential by several participants, not only in the presence of diverse individuals but also in creating safe and respected spaces for their voices. The faculty participants emphasized that a safe space for communication is crucial; a space where individuals can thrive without facing additional barriers.

### **Question #2: How would you describe the current climate of the college when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion?**

The faculty suggested that the current climate at the college reflects a mix of positive engagement and challenges in implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Tangible steps, such as designated search advocates and open DEI committee meetings, have

been taken, making DEI conversations more normalized. New faculty members expressed surprise at the prominence of DEI initiatives on campus, with some perceiving it as a forced initiative. Despite this, faculty recognize that integrating DEI into curriculum and extra-curricular events is essential for fostering openness and correcting behaviors that hinder diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Faculty noted that they face challenges in balancing conversations and providing a space for diverse perspectives in the classroom. They observed that many students are progressive and open to DEI conversations. However, some students who hold more conservative views may self-censor due to fear of being shut down or perceived as hateful. Concerns persist about incorporating perspectives of some student groups, such as non-binary and immigrants. Faculty feel they are challenged to include different experiences and remove barriers for specific groups to be heard within the learning context. Balancing respect for current opinions while encouraging new perspectives remains an important -- but sometimes elusive -- goal.

While the college's DEI efforts to date were acknowledged -- especially those related to trying to diversify the faculty and to promote inclusive teaching -- the overall efforts of the college were described as relatively quiet compared to other community colleges with more advanced DEI initiatives. Faculty participants recommended a more practical approach to DEI, moving beyond discussions of definitions to identifying and implementing DEI in classrooms, meetings, and hallways. It was suggested that LCC is in an early stage of exploring and learning about DEI, with the need for a transition to more direct involvement and practical application of DEI principles.

### **Question #3: In what ways does the college encourage or support a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion?**

The faculty participants described how the college supports diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through various initiatives and resources. These initiatives collectively contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for students and faculty, addressing various aspects of diversity and equity. According to faculty, these include the following:

1. **Professional Development:** The college offered an optional session on inclusive pedagogy, including a focus on disability perspectives, with significant participation.
2. **Safe-Zone Training:** The college offers Safe-Zone Training to create safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students.
3. **DEI Committee:** The college leadership encourages faculty and staff to participate in on-campus and state-level DEI committees.

4. **Inclusive Attitude and Flexibility:** The college fosters a generally inclusive attitude, supporting flexibility in coordinating and teaching courses to enhance the possibility of student success. Administrators have implemented policies such as extra credit assignments accessible to all students, aiming to make internal practices more inclusive. Participants noted that some faculty teach courses focused on promoting diversity within specific career fields.
5. **Student Support:** DSS provides recorders and access to American Sign Language (ASL) resources to support students with disabilities. The e-Learning department facilitates equity by allowing students to check out laptops, ethernet cables, and hotspots to overcome technology barriers. Recognizing that there is a significant number of students in poverty, the college fosters equity by providing a food pantry and encouraging faculty to bring in food for students. The faculty also pointed out that support for a wide range of student clubs and the availability of translators in class contribute to a more inclusive environment. The college also encourages events that promote diversity.
6. **Faculty Diversity and Affinity Groups:** There is a concerted effort to hire faculty of color, and affinity groups have been created on campus. Faculty are encouraged to serve on both internal DEI committees and state-wide committees.
7. **Inclusive Signage:** The campus features signage promoting inclusivity and diversity.
8. **International Programs:** Faculty pointed out that LCC played a key role in assisting Vietnamese refugees, contributing to a historically welcoming and inclusive community. The college further supports diversity through international programs.

**Question #4: If you are comfortable, in what ways have you witnessed or experienced discrimination or racism in the workplace at the college, if at all?**

Faculty participants shared that they have observed or experienced various instances of prejudice and discrimination. They also reported experiencing subtle acts of exclusion on campus—unintentional but nonetheless impactful. The faculty participants observed the following:

1. **Student Attitudes:** Faculty report hearing discriminatory attitudes from students, with some openly expressing homophobic and discriminatory language, particularly when the campus is open to the community.

2. **Microaggressions:** While there haven't been large confrontations, microaggressions were noted by faculty as having negative impacts and needing attention. Participants also observed that some faculty members, especially those with privilege, may not always be aware of discriminatory instances on campus.
3. **Discrimination Based on Socioeconomic Status:** Faculty have witnessed discrimination against students from low-income backgrounds and worry about the pervasive nature of this issue in the community.
4. **Diminishment of Faculty:** Faculty express feelings of diminishment, with incidents of those in higher positions not respecting their expertise. They recounted instances where experience and knowledge were not acknowledged or honored.
5. **Discrimination Against Women Faculty:** Women faculty members report distinct discrimination, feeling excluded from certain spaces. Some also feel they face challenges in achieving the same success as other populations in higher education.
6. **Negative Language and Discrimination:** Faculty emphasize the importance of using inclusive language and recounted instances where negative language was used, impacting the people referred to in negative ways.
7. **Imposter Syndrome:** Some faculty experience “imposter syndrome;” feeling unprepared or inexperienced in the higher education teaching environment, especially when guidance is lacking.
8. **Trauma in Classrooms:** Faculty expressed concerns about addressing trauma in classrooms and about feeling inadequately equipped to handle inclusivity concerns related to students' experiences.
9. **Gateway Class Disparities:** In some gateway classes, male students of color are reported to be 40% more likely to fail, highlighting disparities that have persisted for years.
10. **Bureaucratic Constraints:** The bureaucracy in the institution is seen as a barrier to speaking up, with some faculty members worried about the consequences of sharing their concerns.
11. **Inequality in Facilities:** Certain buildings receive better maintenance, creating disparities in the learning environment. Issues such as leaky roofs, cracked foundations, and lack of air conditioning contribute to discomfort for faculty and students.

## Question #5: What are the biggest barriers that you see to improving the climate of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the college?

The myriad of barriers identified by faculty participants collectively underscore the multifaceted challenges the college faces in fostering an inclusive and diverse environment. Faculty also felt that the national rhetoric of alienation towards DEI and self-censorship to avoid conflict exacerbated these challenges. The biggest barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion at LCC include:

### 1. People Capital

- **Lengthy Hiring Process:** According to participants, the extended duration of the hiring process, with multiple steps and no wage transparency, may favor financially stable candidates, potentially exacerbating racial and economic biases.
- **Lack of Diversity in the Area:** The lack of diversity in the surrounding area was seen by faculty as a barrier to attracting more people to the college, especially those who do not see similar representation at the institution or in the community. The geographical location in a predominantly white conservative area makes it difficult to attract a diverse pool of applicants, hindering efforts to have more diverse hiring committees. The faculty also suggested that the lack of diversity within the larger community may discourage individuals from marginalized communities from wanting to reside in the area.
- **Emphasis on Degrees over Experience:** In the view of several participants, the prioritization of degrees over experience in the system creates an additional barrier to promoting diversity.
- **Training Deficiency:** Some faculty indicated that DEI training for faculty is considered lacking and, further, is based on the erroneous assumption that all faculty members understand DEI concepts and principles.
- **Organized Structure for Adjuncts:** The absence of an organized structure for offering classes to adjuncts based on levels of seniority was seen as a barrier to equity.
- **Unequal Distribution of Projects:** Large college-wide projects are often assigned to vulnerable individuals without sufficient protection if they challenge the administration.
- **Favoritism and Barriers for Newer Faculty:** Favoritism towards older faculty poses barriers for newer faculty, potentially perpetuating existing norms.

## 2. Resource Challenges

- **Lack of Support Systems:** Creating equitable and inclusive environments requires robust support systems for faculty and staff, but faculty suggested that the college faces difficulties in establishing and maintaining such systems.
- **Communication of Resources:** Students may not always be aware of resources on campus due to challenges in communication.
- **Technological Barriers:** Both students and faculty face technological barriers, impacting accessibility and inclusivity.

## 3. DEI and Organizational Structure

- Some faculty indicated that the purpose of having a DEI committee is to “check a box.” They suggested that the committee was perceived to be advisory and with limited or no power.
- The faculty also suggested that some believe that the committee's existence alone is sufficient for addressing DEI issues, while faculty advocated that positive action is needed in all areas of the college in order to promote DEI.
- The absence of a dedicated DEI officer was highlighted by several faculty, and they pointed out the need for someone who can drive the DEI agenda and provide a foundational space for initiatives.
- The lack of transparency around the results of DEI efforts was identified as a barrier, making it difficult for the community to understand the impact of initiatives.

### **Question #6: What recommendations do you have for the institution to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in the campus climate?**

There was considerable discussion regarding recommendations for improving the climate for DEI at LCC. I have categorized the participants' suggestions under four primary topics: People Capital (including professional development), Leading/Coordinating DEI Initiatives, Leadership, and General Strategies.

#### **1. People Capital**

- **Diversify Staff:** Make a more concerted effort to diversify staff to promote diversity within the campus community, ensuring representation, especially among students.

- **Enhanced Onboarding for New Employees:** Improve onboarding for new employees by focusing not only on technical aspects but also on cultural expectations and creating connections with the community.
- **Professional Development:**
  - Allocate a set time during all-campus professional development events where everyone is available to engage with DEI work, programming, and initiatives.
  - Offer more regular professional development to address topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion with the goal of fostering a common understanding and offering needed resources.
  - Shift from online and e-learning training to more “humanizing” training, incorporating personal narratives from keynote speakers to increase openness, and understanding in the community.
  - Include DEI training in departmental training courses to focus on relevant topics and foster discussions.

## 2. Leading/Coordinating DEI Initiatives

- **Fund a Full-Time DEI Director or Office:** Faculty suggested that LCC fund a full-time DEI director or a small office with staff dedicated to ongoing DEI efforts such as: mindful messaging; coordinating diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, committees, and programming; and holding the college accountable.
- **Central Coordinating Body:** Establish a central coordinating body to facilitate and organize events related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, instead of having fragmented displays at student and community events.
- **Scope and Consistency:** The participants thought that the college should...
  - ensure that action and commitment to DEI initiatives exist in all facets and areas of the institution, moving beyond just committee recommendations.
  - take a solid stance to communicate the efforts, initiatives, and values related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, both within the campus and to the external community.
  - strive for more consistency in events, activities, and initiatives, avoiding continuous pauses and encouraging broader participation.
- **Honor Completed Efforts:** Communicate the ongoing life of completed initiatives to the community, honoring the time and energy invested by participants.



### 3. Leadership

- **Engaged Leadership:** Encourage leadership to walk around and go into classrooms, providing support rather than evaluation, to connect with the student population, and to develop a better understanding of everyday occurrences and situations experienced by faculty, staff, and students.
- **Leadership Bravery:** Promote bravery in leadership to adopt and model practices such as land acknowledgments, pronoun sharing, and other small, public, and meaningful measures.
- **Action Leadership:** Demonstrate leadership through action rather than words, engaging in face-to-face conversations with faculty to understand their needs and provide support. Be present to help solve difficult issues.

### 4. General Strategies

- **Collaboration Across Subjects:** Encourage intentional collaboration across subjects and fields of study on in-service days to promote diversity and inclusion.
- **Data-Driven Strategies:** Utilize data on student populations to implement pragmatic measures and provide resources in classrooms, emphasizing best practices.
- **Opportunities to Hear Student Perspectives:** Create more opportunities for faculty to hear from students directly, gaining a better understanding of student perspectives on faculty practices.
- **Focus on Difficult Issues:** When sharing reports from DEI listening sessions, emphasize addressing difficult issues rather than focusing only on low-hanging fruit.
- **Effective Communication:** Ensure effective communication by using platforms like Google Forms to gather opinions and follow up with real human engagement, avoiding the perception of tokenism.
- **Language Accessibility:** Continue efforts to provide information, resources, and technology in multiple languages to ensure accessibility.
- **Support for Socioeconomically Challenged Students:** Implement more resources and support for socioeconomically challenged students to overcome barriers and navigate financial aid hurdles.
- **Avoiding Deficit Language:** Refrain from using deficit language when referring to the college population and instead focus on empowering and providing opportunities.

## Overview and Observations

The “flow” of the listening session questions was to ask participants their vision of a diverse, equitable and inclusive work environment; in what ways LCC supports a DEI environment; their experiences, if any, related to prejudice or discrimination; barriers to creating a positive environment at LCC; and suggestions for improving the campus climate.

The faculty described a diverse and inclusive workplace as one that strives to create an environment where employees and students can succeed, contribute, and be recognized for their unique qualities and perspectives. Faculty participants could point to a number of areas where the college is supportive of DEI efforts – the Search Advocate program was mentioned several times, for example.

However, there was also a sense of uncertainty regarding the college's progress in fostering a positive DEI culture. Various factors, described by faculty in their responses reported above, contribute to doubts about the college’s leadership commitment to supporting diversity. They characterized leadership as “quiet” about DEI and the college’s DEI efforts as being in its “infancy,” and “exploratory stages.” Leadership and the “messaging from the top” were identified during these sessions as crucial factors in shaping the college's identity and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As one faculty participant pointed out: “The college needs to decide what it wants to be, and that comes from the top.”

While the perspectives offered during the listening sessions collectively highlight a range of challenges to a diverse and inclusive environment—including some issues related to prejudice and discrimination that impact both faculty and students at the college—the faculty were generous with ideas for creating a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable environment at Lower Columbia College.

The faculty participants would like the college to reconsider both hiring practices and the resource allocation process to more strongly and publicly support DEI efforts. The college is perceived to need more resources in various aspects, including technology, food accessibility, faculty, staff, and trauma resources. They suggested that more professional development and discussions on DEI topics are needed at multiple levels within the institution.

In particular, building a strong DEI Committee and hiring a DEI Coordinator to promote, coordinate and monitor the college’s DEI efforts were key recommendations made by the faculty. As one participant noted: “I don’t think we do as much listening as we think do. We should be hiring a DEI officer...who can drive the point home and is able to provide a foundational space for DEI.” The goal, described by several faculty, was “getting to solutions” rather than just “checking the box.”