

Lower Columbia Community College

**Staff Listening & Feedback Sessions:
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion**

**Facilitated & Reported by
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Spring 2024

Background

In Spring 2023, the consultant was contacted by Wendy Hall, Vice President of Effectiveness & College Relations, and Lower Columbia College's (LCC) Public Information Officer. She asked me to assist the college with the development and implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) listening and feedback sessions with the college community during the 2023-24 academic year. This work would supplement the campus climate surveys conducted by the college in recent years and directly support LCC's DEI mission and DEI Strategic Plan (see <https://lowercolumbia.edu/diversity-equity/>).

The consultant provided college staff with a draft planning document for review in December 2023. That document included proposed target audiences and logistics, and a draft protocol for the listening sessions. The "flow" of the questions for all employee groups was to ask participants their vision of a diverse, equitable and inclusive environment; in what ways the college supports a DEI environment; their experiences, if any, related to prejudice or discrimination; barriers to creating a positive environment at the college; and suggestions for changes that could improve the campus climate. The protocol also included an introductory section, and expectations about participation and confidentiality.

Five (5) staff listening sessions were held in the latter part of April 2024. Staff were provided with information and sign-up opportunities during the month prior. There were 18 classified and exempt staff participants over the 5 sessions.

Results from the Staff Listening & Feedback Sessions

A summary of staff responses to each of the five (5) listening session questions is provided below. In some cases, their responses are categorized to add clarity and to support the continuing conversations about staff perceptions of the DEI climate at LCC.

Question #1: How would you describe an environment that is equitable and inclusive?

The staff responses highlight various facets of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive (DEI) environment, emphasizing the importance of representation, respect, and actionable policies. They also suggested that such an environment "challenges the people who work here to continually grow."

1. **Diverse Representation:** A truly diverse and inclusive workplace includes people of different races, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic statuses, genders, and sexual orientations. This diversity is not just limited to visual differences but extends to diverse

opinions, lifestyles, and ideas. “I want to hear from people from different backgrounds, [geographic] areas, and beliefs.”

2. **Respect and Value:** For an environment to be inclusive, it’s crucial that everyone feels valued and respected. “Merely welcoming diverse individuals isn’t enough; it is essential to ensure that they are treated with respect and their contributions are valued.”
3. **Implementation from the Heart:** Participants suggested that DEI initiatives should go beyond meetings and emails. “They should be deeply embedded in the way colleagues interact with each other and with stakeholders like donors and students.” “It’s about embracing and practicing these values sincerely.”
4. **Sense of Belonging:** Creating a sense of belonging is vital. People should feel like “they are meant to be there rather than just fitting into a box.” This involves understanding and addressing the hardships individuals may face and treating people as they wish to be treated.
5. **Supporting Diverse Students:** It’s important to recognize and address the barriers that students from diverse backgrounds face. The goal should be to make their educational journey easier, “not just to simplify administrative tasks.”
6. **Differing Opinions:** Encouraging different opinions and ideas is crucial for fostering healthy conversations and growth. However, these differing ideas should be utilized constructively, especially in administrative decisions and resource allocation.
7. **Transparency:** “A place where there is openness to direct and critical communication as transparency and consistency of processes” to help break down equity barriers and build trust within the community.
8. **Representation in Authority:** It’s not enough to have diverse representation at lower levels. “People from diverse backgrounds should also be in positions of authority and visibility, ensuring they have a voice in decision-making processes.”
9. **Accessibility:** DEI efforts should include considerations for different abilities and learning styles. This means providing accommodations, and ensuring communications are accessible, including different languages and formats.
10. **Safe and Inclusive Environment:** Staff participants suggested that a safe environment is one where people feel comfortable speaking up without fear of retribution. It’s crucial to address and mitigate jokes or biases that can alienate individuals, ensuring that inclusivity is practiced *even when those affected are not present*.

Question #2: From your perspective, in what ways does LCC support a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion?

The session participants provided a detailed and multifaceted perspective on how the college supports equity, inclusion, and diversity (DEI).

1. Student Support Systems

- The college has created a One-Stop Center, a centralized location for financial aid and registration, which significantly helps students, especially those for whom English is a second language.
- The College and Career Preparation (CCP) program offers flexible and affordable class schedules, including GED classes for \$25, giving students opportunities to engage with and manage their education more effectively.
- The college foundation has established a student Emergency Fund which provides emergency funds to assist students with essentials like gas, food, and other necessities.

2. Hiring and Training

- The individuals trained as Search Advocate ensure that hiring processes are free from bias, with a recent increase in DEI hires noted by participants.
- Faculty and staff are required to undergo DEI training, and DEI statements are included in public documents and syllabi. The staff observed that training programs that raise awareness about the many ways one can unintentionally offend others are appreciated. "These programs can help individuals become more considerate and mindful of their actions and words."
- A dedicated DEI committee meets monthly to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, contributing to the college's DEI efforts.

3. Community and Cultural Engagement

- The college is developing centers and positions dedicated to fostering a diverse and inclusive environment.
- There are programs that support international students and those from varied backgrounds, facilitating better understanding and relationships among the college community.

4. Leadership and Vision

- The new college president has shown active participation in DEI initiatives, such as attending Head Start family policy council meetings, signaling, it is hoped, a commitment to building stronger community ties.
- The foundation works with donors and campus departments to provide scholarships and additional support for students, tailored to their diverse needs.

5. Encouraging Reporting

- The college encourages the reporting of discriminatory behavior, emphasizing the importance of having a paper trail to act on incidents.
- Staff work with students to report and address discrimination, showing a commitment to tackling these issues.

However, a few participants struggled to identify examples of effective DEI support, which might suggest the need for more visible and successful DEI initiatives. Some staff also perceived the college's DEI efforts as superficial, with actions often feeling performative rather than genuine and impactful.

Question #3: If you are comfortable sharing, in what ways have you witnessed or experienced prejudice or discrimination at LCC?

The staff participants shared a range of experiences and observations regarding prejudicial and discriminatory behavior on campus. Some **reported examples of discriminatory and prejudicial behavior** included the following:

- A woman of color faced a "joke" about being fingerprinted as a terrorist during a department meeting.
- A Spanish-speaking staff member faced microaggressions, especially after it was revealed they received extra pay for their language skills.
- Tokenistic practices, like being forced to wear ribbons indicating they spoke Spanish, were implemented without consulting them.
- Two queer co-workers were targeted with rumors of having an affair.
- Staff reported working closely with LGBTQ+ students who faced discrimination, helping them navigate the reporting process and ensuring their concerns were addressed.
- It was reported that in a department meeting, a middle-aged white man suggested that the role of women was to assist men.

- Staff have observed biases against certain religions, with colleagues making negative comments and using social media to express these prejudices.

The participants also discussed negatively perceived **institutional practices**, including the following:

- A woman of color went through a rigorous hiring process for an administrative position but was ultimately rejected, while a middle-aged white man was quickly hired for a similar role without a proper process.
- A coach was stealthily hired and assigned an advising role he was unfamiliar with, bypassing standard hiring procedures.
- Female staff members were not offered telework options during the pandemic, while their male counterparts were.
- Women's positions were downgraded during the pandemic to entry-level or part-time roles, but the perception was that men in similar roles received promotions and higher salaries.
- Staff observed that power dynamics within the administration can lead to discriminatory practices, such as stealth hiring and favoritism towards certain candidates.
- The process for appointing administrators has sometimes bypassed standard procedures, contributing to a lack of trust and transparency.
- There are issues with tokenism, such as hiring practices that seem more focused on diversity metrics than on genuine inclusion and support.

Some participants suggested that these issues were the result of inadequate DEI efforts, that the college's DEI efforts are more performative than genuine, with inadequate follow-through and resources for DEI initiatives.

Question #4: What are barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the college?

The staff participants identified a range of barriers that impacted DEI efforts at the college. Interestingly, they identified a variety of **technological and administrative complexities that created barriers for students**. For example, first-generation and low-income students face significant challenges navigating the application and enrollment processes without adequate support. The current system requires multiple logins, passwords, and steps, creating confusion and making it difficult for students “who are not computer savvy or a without a strong support system to complete their enrollment.” Although a single sign-on system has been introduced, the complexity remains a barrier for new students.

In addition, the financial aid process is seen as a significant barrier, particularly for students without prior experience or family support for navigating these systems.

They also noted that the college website and navigation of technological resources are confusing and disorganized, making it difficult for students to find necessary information and resources.

In addition to these challenges faced by students, the participants also reported a variety of institutional barriers and process inefficiencies. They have been categorized into the following 4 topics:

1. Lack of DEI Infrastructure

- There is no standardized DEI assessment tool or process across the college, making it challenging for departments to implement DEI initiatives effectively. “Many people are not opposed to the work but need a place to start.”
- This lack of structure hinders passionate DEI advocates from making significant progress.

2. Lack of Genuine DEI Commitment

- While the college professes a commitment to DEI, there is a perception that actions do not match the rhetoric, with a lot of lip service but little tangible progress.
- DEI efforts often fall on a few dedicated individuals, leading to burnout and insufficient systemic change.

3. Institutional Practices

- Hiring processes are often not followed rigorously, with disparities in the treatment of candidates based on race, leading to pay discrepancies and feelings of inequity.
- There are instances of “stealth hiring,” which bypasses standard procedures.
- Only a few employees receive benefits for being multilingual, despite the potential value of dual language skills in serving a diverse student body.
- There is a lack of representation and support for languages other than English, impacting the college’s ability to support non-English speaking students adequately.
- Multilingual staff in positions like Head Start teachers are not recognized or compensated for their language skills, despite their necessity for communicating with non-English speaking students.

- DEI training facilitators and volunteers often face burnout due to high workloads and lack of compensation or support for their additional efforts.
- Participants reported instances of pay disparities between white staff and staff of color in similar roles.
- The lingering effects of COVID-19 have disrupted connection and collaboration among staff and faculty, further hindering DEI efforts. There is a need for more empathy and compassion towards staff and faculty, particularly in the context of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Staff members, especially those from marginalized communities, report microaggressions and a lack of genuine inclusion.

4. Leadership and Decision-Making

- Decisions related to DEI are often made by those in director and administrative roles without adequate input from affected communities, leading to ineffective or superficial changes.
- There is a lack of transparency and accountability in the implementation of DEI initiatives.
- Leadership “delegates the work, but not the resources.”
- There was a sense from the participants that diverse voices are not adequately represented or heard in decision-making processes, leading to policies and practices that do not fully address the needs of marginalized groups.

Question #5: What should the college do to improve the climate of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The session participants provide a range of thoughtful responses and ideas about how the college might improve the culture at LCC. Their responses have been categorized into 6 topical areas:

1. Commitment and Accountability

- Ensure the institution fulfills its commitments to supporting the environment, people, and overall DEI initiatives.
- While DEI training is required, it is not consistently enforced, and there is a need for better implementation of these standards across campus.

- Create layers of accountability within executive leadership to ensure DEI decisions are transparent and involve input from various stakeholders.
- Enforce existing hiring laws and policies consistently to ensure equitable hiring practices.
- Many of the participants advocated for a call to action rather than just brochures and presentations. "DEI efforts should be visibly implemented and start from the top, ensuring that policies translate into real, everyday practices."
- Move beyond performative DEI efforts. Ensure that leadership listens to and acts upon feedback from diverse staff members.
- The DEI committee and related initiatives often lack necessary resources and funding, relying on members to bring their own snacks to meetings and struggling to host events.

2. Communication and Engagement

- There is a call for more direct engagement and communication from college leadership to better connect with and support the community.
- Improve communication regarding DEI initiatives, outcomes, and processes to keep the community informed and engaged.
- Some staff feel disconnected from various college departments and are unaware of the full scope of available resources and support structures.
- Address understaffing to enable staff to participate in DEI committees and events. Ensure people have the time and resources to be involved in these initiatives. contributions.
- Foster connections between different departments through regular events and highlights, allowing staff to build relationships and better understand each other's roles and contributions.
- Schedule DEI-related events and activities outside regular work hours or make attendance excused to increase participation and engagement.

3. Hiring Practices

- Some Search Advocates feel tokenized, as their role is often limited to asking questions without seeing substantial follow-through or genuine action.
- Solidify and follow hiring processes to ensure fairness and attract a diverse pool of candidates. Utilize multiple platforms for job postings to reach a broader audience.

- Incorporate diverse life experiences into hiring criteria to reflect the diverse student population better.

4. Training and Development

- Institutionalize DEI training for all staff and faculty, including specific PDU hours dedicated to DEI work.
- Develop DEI resources and toolkits for faculty to incorporate into their teaching and daily interactions.
- Establish a dedicated DEI department with adequate resources to lead initiatives, develop programs, and provide ongoing support and education.

5. Support and Empowerment

- Encourage leaders and staff to recognize and understand their privilege, using it to create more equitable hiring and support practices.
- Integrate DEI principles and practices into faculty resources, ensuring that all staff members have access to the tools needed to support marginalized communities effectively.
- Foster an environment where staff and students feel safe reporting DEI-related issues without fear of retaliation.
- Ensure there is an open and clear communication channel for reporting, with follow-up to let reporters know their concerns are being addressed.
- Create mechanisms for staff to provide feedback on DEI initiatives and see how their input is being utilized to make improvements.

6. Leadership and Vision

- Leadership must actively buy into and support DEI initiatives, setting the tone for the rest of the institution.
- Ensure DEI values are communicated and reinforced at all levels, from top management to staff and students.
- Build a sense of community and mission among staff, ensuring they feel valued and connected to the institution's DEI goals.
- Several participants mentioned that they felt like leadership was open to listening to their concerns and criticisms, but that little or no action is ever taken.
- “We have a good planning and process, but implementation is failing.”

Observations

In summary, staff participants advocated for a workplace that not only talks about diversity and inclusion but actively practices it through respect, representation, transparency, and genuine implementation of inclusive policies. According to some of the participants, the college has made significant strides in supporting DEI through various initiatives, including centralized student support, anti-bias hiring practices, dedicated DEI training, and the establishment of supportive structures like the DEI committee and multicultural center. A long-term LCC employee spoke to these changes and shared her feelings that “it’s like my second home here.”

Some staff also acknowledged the college's efforts to value DEI, noting improvements compared to other campuses where they have worked. Staff noted that they were grateful for opportunities to meet with folks from other countries, have conversations, and “get to know one another despite some differences.”

Despite significant efforts and structures in place to support DEI at the college, staff have observed and experienced various forms of discrimination and prejudicial behavior. These range from gender and racial biases to microaggressions and tokenism. While these occurrences highlight the need for more genuine, consistent, and well-resourced DEI initiatives, at the same time, the college appears to strongly support reporting such incidences so that these issues can be addressed.

The listening session responses suggest that although the college has made strides in DEI, significant barriers remain, particularly in the areas of technological navigation, language support, consistent DEI processes and implementation, adequate funding, effective communication, and ensuring that DEI efforts are genuine and impactful. During these sessions, the staff highlighted both the positive steps taken and the need for ongoing improvement to truly foster an inclusive and equitable environment. They observed that “putting the DEI efforts on one group or department and expecting them to provide all the magic” is not a viable path to growth.

It should be noted that the Search Advocate initiative was seen as both a significant step forward and an example of “checking the box.” While some folks suggested that this initiative was developing awareness as well as positively impacting the hiring process, others felt that the opportunities to participate were limited for staff, and that the process was not being fully implemented as described in LCC’s Search Advocate guidance materials. For example, “the advocate is not a part of writing the job description” or involved in conversations prior to reviewing applications about “equitable ways of reviewing.”

Another observation is that the Head Start staff would very much like the opportunity to meet with and get to know other members of the college community. They feel a sense of “disconnectedness” and would appreciate a chance to build those relationships.

Addressing the issues identified by staff requires systemic action, inclusive decision-making, and robust support structures for both students and staff to create a truly equitable and inclusive environment. The suggestions provided by staff could help the college make meaningful progress towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students, staff, and faculty.