

EQUITY AND INCLUSION: REPORT ON OUTREACH AND CONSULTATION DURING ACADEMIC YEAR 2021-22

OVERVIEW

During the 2021-22 academic year, the president and a team of colleagues undertook a structured consultation process with students, faculty, and staff to understand their experiences with equity and inclusion efforts at Bates and solicit ideas for approaches that we should consider to improve our consistency and effectiveness in this work. The team also considered a range of models at peer institutions for taking the work forward. This process of outreach and consultation was undertaken following the departure of Bates' Vice President for Equity and Inclusion (VPEI) in the summer of 2021, and was designed, in part, to inform the search for the next vice president. We commenced the search in the spring of 2022, but it did not result in a successful hire. We have relaunched the search this fall, with the goal of completing a successful hire by the end of the first semester.

The Process

Between September 2021 and April 2022, President Clayton Spencer and a team comprising Tonya Bailey-Curry, Staff Therapist and Director for Special Projects in Student Affairs, Gwen Lexow, Director of Title IX and Civil Rights Compliance, and Jennifer Blanchard, Senior Writer and Assistant to the President, met with approximately 300 members of the Bates community in large and small groups and in one-on-one meetings. We also enlisted the services of Rodney Glasgow, President and Principal Consultant at The Glasgow Group, a diversity, equity, and inclusion consulting firm, to facilitate a series of meetings with students. These conversations were designed to solicit feedback on campus culture, understand the needs of different constituencies, and generate ideas to advance the work of equity and inclusion across campus.

Throughout the process of outreach and consultation, we heard the perspectives of community members with a broad range of experiences, identities, and backgrounds. We asked for candor and specificity, and found students and colleagues alike willing and eager to offer both.

The conversations we had, and the feedback we received, were enormously helpful in deepening our understanding of culture and practice at Bates and in sharpening our thinking about how best to structure the work of the VPEI in relation to that of other colleagues centrally engaged in advancing these commitments. Our learning from these consultations directly informed the search, this past spring, for Bates' next VPEI, both in how we articulated the opportunities and challenges of the role and in how the search committee considered candidates. The observations and recommendations we heard from the campus community will continue to guide us this fall in the recommenced search, as well as in ongoing work with students, faculty, and staff.

Following is a summary of the themes that emerged from our consultations, some specific recommendations for new approaches, and our initial thinking about how to incorporate some of the ideas that emerged in our collective work moving forward.

OUTREACH AND CONSULTATION

Faculty and Staff Feedback

Overview

- **There is broad agreement on the importance of equity and inclusion work at Bates and a sense of urgency about making effective and sustainable progress.** Our community's earnest commitment is reflected in the range of initiatives focused on equity and inclusion in the academic program, in student life and support, and among staff and administrative and operational departments across the college. It was also apparent in the willingness of individuals to participate in the consultation sessions and offer thoughtful and specific observations and recommendations for improvement.
- **At the same time, there is a sense of fatigue and distrust with respect to equity and inclusion work at Bates.** Many colleagues expressed discouragement at being through too many transitions of leadership, direction, and organization during a period in which the work has never felt more important. Overall, faculty and staff desire both more consistency and sustained progress and more transparency and communication about equity and inclusion work across the college.
- **Faculty and staff acknowledged the strides the college has made in a number of areas.** Many spoke to the success of the work done as part of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) grant focused on curricular transformation and inclusive pedagogy in STEM. Others mentioned the importance of the Foundational Dialogues, called for by the Dean of the Faculty, that ask all academic programs to engage in discipline-specific equity and inclusion work to inform curricular design and pedagogy. Colleagues also recognized the progress in diversifying the faculty and staff through improved search processes and praised the efforts to secure grants from the Schuler Education Foundation and the Kessler Scholars Collaborative to assist in recruiting Pell-eligible, low income, and first generation students. The newly formed Colleagues of Color group, including faculty and staff, was also cited as a welcome resource for the community.
- **Many colleagues expressed concern about the nature of discourse on campus concerning issues of equity and inclusion.** Despite the view at Bates that there is earnest interest among colleagues across campus in engaging in equity and inclusion work, some colleagues expressed concern that conversations on this topic are less open and robust than they need to be in order to make progress. Some colleagues mentioned their own lack of fluency with relevant topics, and emphasized the importance of ongoing opportunities for education, training, and substantive programming. Others felt that the questioning and debate necessary to figure out the best approaches to different aspects of the work were sometimes mistakenly received as resistance to the work itself. Importantly, many colleagues of color expressed frustration and exhaustion at the slow and inconsistent pace of progress on issues of equity and inclusion at Bates, the fact that they were repeatedly placed in situations where the level of conversation was far below their own level of experience and understanding, and the expectation that they will be asked to repeatedly share their own

experiences with bias and racism to educate their colleagues about issues for which learning should be activated in other ways.

Areas of Emphasis

Faculty and staff across the college noted the critical need for collaboration and support in the following areas:

- **Recruitment, onboarding, and retention of faculty and staff.** Colleagues are looking for guidelines and practices for inclusive recruiting and onboarding, including recognizing and addressing implicit bias in the development of candidate pools and the evaluation of individual candidates. They also called for collaboration in expanding mentorship and professional development programs to improve retention of employees from historically marginalized groups and ensure that departments are helping all employees to thrive.
- **Training and education.** There is a broad desire to see a comprehensive plan for ongoing, progressive training and education. Led by the VPEI and their office, such a plan would explore models for programs to be run throughout the college by a variety of individuals in accordance with best practices in the field. The goal would be to develop a curriculum that allows people to progress in their engagement with this work in ways that build on, rather than repeat, previous learning.
- **Assistance with leading teams, supervision, and difficult situations and conversations.** Managers and supervisors voiced a need for assistance from the Office of Equity and Inclusion, in conjunction with Human Resources, with leading their teams in using inclusive frameworks and navigating challenging situations and difficult conversations.
- **Applying equity frameworks to departmental projects and initiatives.** Faculty and staff are looking for guidance about how to move from the theoretical to the practical, how to prioritize and sequence projects, and how to keep equity at the forefront of departmental decision-making.
- **Helping all campus constituencies understand where they can find support.** Colleagues across the college expressed the need for greater clarity and more consistent communication about where individuals should seek support regarding equity and inclusion education, practices, initiatives, and concerns.

Student Feedback

Overview

While students voiced many of the same concerns as faculty and staff, there were some themes particular to the student experience that arose throughout the consultation process.

- **Students see belonging as essential to their ability to thrive at Bates.** Students describe challenges in belonging at Bates as connected to divisions in the student body, some of

which is based on race and gender, and some of which is located in socioeconomic differences among students.

- **Students expressed concern about turnover in the Office of Intercultural Education over the past several years.** Students have been discouraged to see trusted staff with whom they had made meaningful connections leave the college, and they perceive the inconsistency in the OIE as a lack of investment and care on the part of the college.
- **Students want a community that is more unified and inclusive, but they are not sure how to achieve this.** Commons was often referenced as a site of self-segregation, where students habitually sit with the same groups of people. Even as students acknowledge their own participation in this system of separation, they expressed strong interest in breaking down established barriers and finding ways for students to branch out and strengthen ties with others in the student community. They seek leadership from administrators and other staff in navigating these barriers.
- **Students are frustrated by the pace of change.** They perceive change as coming slowly and find a lack of urgency by the college in responding to their concerns. This view is fueled by what they perceive as an overall lack of communication about equity and inclusion issues. They desire quicker action and more communication in response to the issues they raise.

Areas of Emphasis

- **Students expressed the need for training and education for all students, faculty, and staff on issues of race, gender, ability, and religion.** Students highlighted the need for an ongoing, comprehensive plan for education of the entire campus community, including fellow students. They specifically cited the desire for this education to address all forms of equity and inclusion, not simply race.
- **Students do not know how to access the information and resources they need.** Students from a variety of backgrounds expressed difficulty with navigating Bates systems and finding the support they needed.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR MOVING THE WORK OF EQUITY AND INCLUSION FORWARD

Building on the observations, critiques, and ideas outlined above, we offer the following observations:

- **Inequity and lack of inclusion are systemic problems requiring systemic solutions.** All members of the Bates community contribute to the culture and practices that create barriers to full participation in the life of the college for certain students and campus colleagues. It follows, therefore, that we all have a role to play in reinventing our culture and practice to remove barriers and make Bates a more equitable and inclusive institution. The college also has a role to play in providing the Bates community with the resources, tools, and educational opportunities to raise both our own knowledge of the issues at stake and our self-awareness about the assumptions we bring to our work, as well as how we interact

with others on campus. In a more formal sense, different departments, offices, and groups have equity and inclusion work as an explicit part of their formal responsibilities—from the student-facing Office of Intercultural Education to the alumni-facing Office of College Advancement to the Dean of the Faculty's Office to Human Resources. Yet all departments—academic, administrative, or co-curricular—need to incorporate the equity and inclusion lens in everything they do.

- **Bates will be best served by a structural approach to equity and inclusion work.** Throughout our consultations, we heard broad support for a structural approach, also expressed as a distributed model, for equity and inclusion work at Bates. In this model, the VPEI provides institutional leadership and a motivating vision for the work, while working collaboratively with programs and departments across campus that are moving the work forward in specific areas. For example, the Office for Intercultural Education is the primary locus for student-facing work in this area, and is part of the Division of Student Affairs. Likewise, the Office of the Dean of the Faculty has primary responsibility for efforts in recruiting and retaining a diverse and excellent faculty, working to create inclusive curricula and pedagogy across departments and programs, and ensuring that we provide effective academic support and advising for all students. The Office of Human Resources oversees policy and practice related to the recruiting, management, and retention of a diverse staff, and supports colleagues throughout the college in creating environments that enable all employees to do their best work. The Office of Human Resources has as a high priority enhancing its capacity to support this work. The Office of College Advancement has increased its staffing for alumni and family programs focused on expanding the participation of LGBTQ+ and alumni of color. The power of the distributed model is that it infuses equity and inclusion work, and accountability for this work, into the organizational structure of the college, creates a community of colleagues focused on the work, and promotes stability in times of leadership transition in the Vice President for Equity and Inclusion role.
- **Bates should consider the creation of an equity and inclusion advisory council as part of its organizational structure.** An advisory council, drawn from individuals across the college who are actively involved in equity and inclusion work, would provide a supportive reference group for the VPEI and assist them with developing a comprehensive vision for the college's equity and inclusion work. The council would help build community among those who are invested in this work, breaking down silos and helping the VPEI and others connect more broadly to an active and engaged team. It would also ensure consistency across the organization and across time, transcending the tenure of any one individual team member or leader. There is broad support for the idea of an advisory council. At the same time, many colleagues feel that we should wait for the arrival of a new VPEI, who may well have their own ideas about how best to organize such a body.
- **Reframing the work will have implications for the next Vice President for Equity and Inclusion.** The consultation process informed the development of the [position description](#) for the VPEI role in early 2022. While the search did not result in a hire in the spring of 2022, the search committee has resumed its work this fall, guided by an updated version of this position description. Important framing language from the position description includes:

“The VPEI will possess the ability to create a coherent, sustainable, and motivating vision for equity and inclusion work at Bates, build trust with campus constituencies, and be effective in moving the work of equity and inclusion forward within the context of a liberal arts college. They will identify key challenges, set priorities, build relationships, support ongoing work, share expertise and ideas for new approaches, and inform decision-making for the college as a whole.

“Much of the VPEI’s work will be accomplished through strategic collaborations across the college. The VPEI will work to understand the experiences of historically marginalized students, faculty, and staff as they arrive at Bates and work with colleagues to design effective strategies of support that will help them to be successful in what they have come to Bates to do. The VPEI will also serve as a visible leader and accessible presence as we work collectively to create an authentically inclusive and equitable community.”

CONCLUSION

We want to thank everyone who took part in one or more consultations over the past academic year and spoke so thoughtfully about Bates’ strengths and challenges in equity and inclusion work. Your contributions have already made a difference in the ways we are thinking about how this work is best framed and organized. We look forward to the continued engagement of the campus community as we move the work forward this year and continue to search for our next VPEI.