



FUTURE VISTA IMPACT INITIATIVE



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DIVERSITY OFFICERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EVALUATION REPORT



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A dedicated team offered time, talent, and expertise to the Future Vista Impact Initiative.

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INTRODUCTION

The Future Vista Impact Initiative represents a strategic response to the evolving landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. Led by the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), this comprehensive initiative unfolded across three interconnected phases designed to shape the future of inclusive excellence in higher education.

The initiative began with **Amplifying Student Voices**, a convening engaging students across 40 host institutions in a nationwide dialogue about their vision for inclusive higher education. This convening was held in partnership with the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers. **Restorative Communities of Practice** brought together senior diversity officers from 17 regional sites and four virtual rooms to develop strategic responses to current challenges facing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. The final phase, the **Future Vista Impact Summit**, convened 85 leaders from higher education, corporate sectors, and nonprofit organizations to forge sustainable collaborations and chart a path forward for diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

The project's evaluation framework encompasses both quantitative and qualitative measures, including contributions to NADOHE's State of the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) survey, ensuring that learnings will inform long-term organizational strategy and sector-wide practice.

Through this initiative, NADOHE aims to prepare a new generation of leaders, develop defined coalitions within and outside higher education, and create an evidence-based narrative about the role of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in higher education and beyond.

Situational Context

Unique to this project and worthy of consideration is the implementation timeframe and how that shaped decision-making, delivery approaches, and data collection. The impetus behind this project stemmed from the increasing attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, particularly in higher education, through state legislation. At the time this project began, over 30 states had active legislation dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses and many others were in process. This also drove decision-making by the planning team when deciding which states to engage for convenings and to shift some options to virtual delivery.

PROJECT LEADERSHIP & CONTEXT

National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE)

National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) is the preeminent organization supporting diversity leaders in higher education. Established in 2006, NADOHE serves over 2,200 members, including senior diversity officers, practitioners, scholars, researchers, and professional staff. NADOHE provides essential professional development, resources, and advocacy for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts in higher education. Their offerings include an annual conference, webinars, professional development programs, and the peer-reviewed Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.

The organization's leadership reflects the demographics of its membership, with the field predominantly composed of persons of color and women. According to NADOHE's 2023 State of the CDO survey, the membership includes 51.7% Black, 11.5% Hispanic/Latina/e/o/x, 7.28% Asian/Asian American, 1.5% Indigenous, and 8.8% White professionals, with women comprising 63.3% of members. NADOHE operates under a five-year strategic plan (2022-2027) focused on three key priorities: membership enhancement, industry influence, and organizational sustainability. The organization has been forced to readily adapt in recent years given the ongoing sociopolitical challenges in the United States.

Sova Solutions

Sova is a mission-driven consulting firm that partners with higher education institutions, systems, and organizations to improve student outcomes through sustainable institutional change. Founded in 2015, Sova specializes in helping education leaders tackle complex challenges through a combination of strategic planning, research and evaluation, and capacity building. Sova brings deep expertise in institutional transformation, student success, and equity-centered change management. Sova's approach emphasizes building adaptive capacity within organizations while maintaining focus on measurable improvements in student outcomes, particularly for historically underserved populations. Their work is grounded in research-based frameworks and proven methodologies for supporting organizational learning and development.

Relevant to this project, Sova brings significant thought leadership and serves as a strategic evaluation partner for major higher education initiatives, providing both formative and summative assessment services. Their evaluation approach emphasizes practical, actionable insights that can inform continuous improvement while also measuring progress toward stated outcomes and goals.

Voltage Control

Voltage Control is a facilitation academy that develops leaders through certification programs, workshops, and events while helping leaders navigate uncertainty and complex change through systemic facilitative approaches.

Voltage Control serves diverse clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies to startups, municipal service providers, and universities. Their work centers on helping organizations facilitate change and build resilient teams, whether for product launches, service reimagination, or process improvement.

Through five core values - leading with purpose, practicing craft, fostering inclusive spaces, being adaptive, and cultivating clarity - Voltage Control staff served on the project planning team, provided the strategy and facilitation for **Amplifying Student Voices**, **Restorative Communities of Practice**, and the **Future Vista Impact Summit**, and were engaged in early theme development from collected data.

Philanthropic Support

Phase One, **Amplifying Student Voices**, was a partnership between NADOHE and AAC&U's Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers and was primarily funded through support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Lumina Foundation.

The **Restorative Communities of Practice** convening (Phase Two) and the **Future Vista Impact Summit** (Phase Three) were NADOHE-led efforts and funded by the ECMC Foundation and Amalgamated Foundation through Higher Ed Forward.

FUTURE VISTA IMPACT INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

Phase One: Amplifying Student Voices

NADOHE partnered with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to provide the Amplifying Student Voices convening as the first in the Future Vista Impact series. AAC&U's mission is to advance the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education. The Association partners with higher education institutions to serve as host sites for Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation™ (TRHT) Campus Centers. The centers work to dismantle the false belief in a hierarchy of human value that fuels division and harm within communities and educational settings.

"Student voices are not just relevant — they're essential. Including student perspectives in this project was about honoring the lived experiences of those most impacted by institutional decisions. This convening was not just about student representation — it was about intergenerational knowledge sharing, about ensuring that those who have been in the fight for decades could pass down wisdom while also learning from the urgency and innovation of today's student leaders. When we center student voices, we not only illuminate the present, but help shape a more just and responsive future." — **C. Emmanuel Wright**, **graduate student and planning team member**

NADOHE member institutions and sites for the TRHT campus centers were invited to serve as host locations. The selected institutions represented diverse geographic localities and institutional types. Forty institutions were selected as host sites (see appendix). Each host site identified an administrator to manage event planning and a facilitator to lead the onsite event. The administrator and facilitator were tasked with recruiting 20-25 students from across their campus community to attend a one-day, in person event.

Amplifying Student Voices was held on Saturday, October 5, 2024 from 11am - 4pmET. Students engaged in dialogue with peers from their respective institution and also through a virtual connection across all national sites. This provided opportunity for contextual conversation within spaces, but also sharing through a national dialogue to understand common and diverging experiences. Across host sites, 450+ undergraduate and graduate students attended and engaged throughout the day.

The event opened with remarks from NADOHE president, Paulette Granberry Russell, JD, AAC&U president, Dr. Lynn Pasquerella, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation Chief Transformation & Organizational Effectiveness Officer, Dr. Alandra Washington.

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

"Students coming together to use their voices, their power, and their truth is how we make a difference in our communities."

Facilitated by Voltage Control, students participated in multiple prompts and dialogue through the following guiding questions:

- What would be characteristics and/or practices of higher education institutions and communities where there is no longer a false belief in a hierarchy of human value?
- What would the environment look like, feel like, and be like?
- When you think about what is needed to heal divisions across diverse communities, what are necessary steps in the process?
- What aspects of our current democracy do you feel are working and are representative of diverse groups and viewpoints?

- What specific aspects of our current democracy need to change and evolve to be fully inclusive?
- What would you identify as key steps for achieving an inclusive democracy?
- What do you think higher education leaders should do now and in the future to ensure students feel a sense of belonging and fairness on college campuses?

Data were collected through multiple approaches across the day and used for analysis to understand key insights and future considerations for this work.

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

"We need to bridge the divide between communities and create spaces where student voices can be heard."

Phase Two: Restorative Communities of Practice

The second phase of this project elevated the voices of senior diversity officers across institutions of higher education in an attempt to provide healing and restoration, gauge current challenges, and discuss the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion work across higher education.

Through NADOHE and TRHT networks, institution host sites were solicited from across the nation to represent geographic localities and institutional types. Special consideration was given to states where anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation may prevent engagement or travel. Seventeen institutions served as host sites (see appendix). In addition, NADOHE and TRHT colleagues residing in states where laws prohibit travel were provided an opportunity to attend via a virtual space with a designated senior diversity leader serving as host.

Each host site offered 20-25 seats to attend. Attendees were responsible for their own travel and any associated costs. Given demand, four virtual spaces were provided and saw 40 attendees. Host sites welcomed over 200 senior diversity leaders for a total of over 250 participants for the event.

Restorative Communities of Practice (RCoP) was held on Friday, November 15, 2024 from 11am - 4pmET. Attendees engaged in dialogue within their own communities and also through a virtual connection across all national sites. This provided opportunity for contextual conversations within spaces and across certain geographic areas, but also sharing through a national dialogue to understand common and diverging experiences.

The event opened with remarks from NADOHE president Paulette Granberry Russell, Sova partner and AAC&U Senior Consultant Dr. Tia Brown McNair, and a restorative activity led by Neelam Chand, founder and CEO of ShiftSLC, to center participants prior to intensive discussion. Facilitated by Voltage Control, leaders participated in multiple prompts and dialogue structured around four themes elevating specific issues relevant to the current sociopolitical context:

FRAMING TODAY'S ISSUES #1:

Current and Impending Legislation and Policy Implications; Higher Education Leadership in Consequential Times

- Reflect on, and then share with each other how the current and impending “anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion” attacks, including bills that have been introduced or passed in their state, have impacted how you do your work. This can also include bills introduced in other states and the “chilling effect” on their office, roles/positions outside their office, and other campus policies and programs impacted by the “anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion” efforts.
- If your campus has not been impacted by the challenges, share your thoughts on why that is the case.
- Incorporate in your discussion the impact of these threats on higher education’s mission, values, and leaders (e.g., board members, presidents and chancellors, institutional senior leadership, deans, alumni, donors, and other influential voices). How have leaders responded to changes in law, or the threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts? Is there more that can be done in and outside your institution?

FRAMING TODAY'S ISSUES #2:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advocacy and Support

- What should be done at the state and national level to influence the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, and by whom (e.g., NADOHE, other associations in higher education, social justice organizations, legal)?
- Given the current environment that may be impacting your campus and as you envision and plan for the future, what strategies or plans, including systemic/ structural changes are being made, or should be made to respond to the anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion threats?

FRAMING TODAY'S ISSUES #3:

Chief Diversity Officers, Academic Diversity Officers, and other Campus Diversity Leaders as Change Agents

- Discuss practices that have been successful on your campus in aligning with and embedding this work in the mission of the institution; reducing barriers to success; debunking assumptions about diversity, equity, and inclusion; and enhancing the climate for all; and suggestions for navigating challenges, including pre-emptive efforts to change nomenclature, offices, roles, website, etc., and do you think these efforts will be successful in producing positive changes and outcomes? If so, why?
- Are there resources you need, or think are essential in order for you to lead change? This can include ways you are adapting to changes in your work. Please share your vision and hopes over the next year in making change a reality.

FRAMING TODAY'S ISSUES #4:

Student Voices, Activism, and Reactive Leadership

- Change on campuses can be in response to student voices and activism and can be viewed as reactive, and not always regarded as consistent with institutional values. Do you agree or disagree with this perception, especially in the context of the present challenges and conflicts on college campuses? How are we, as diversity professionals/administrators best positioned to respond to student voices and activism?

Data were collected through multiple approaches across the day and used for analysis to understand key insights and future considerations for this work.

Phase Three: Future Vista Impact Summit

With the theme “Envisioning and Championing the Future for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion”, the third phase of this project sought to convene 100 corporate executives across industries, higher education leaders, and chief diversity officers to reflect on our nation’s current context regarding diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and to envision the future of sustainable diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education. Participants were invited to share their understanding of the centrality of diversity, equity and inclusion to the future of higher education, democracy, the national and global economy, national security, and our greater society toward collaboratively envisioning new ways

of “thinking, being, and doing” about these values and the work associated with them. The goals were to form broader coalitions, to educate an expanded community on a range of relevant issues, and to equip leaders with the information and tools to effectively advocate for the work.

Attendees were identified for invitation through NADOHE connections with corporate listservs, existing leadership relationships, partnerships across the higher education community, the NADOHE board of directors and roles within the national chapters. Attention was placed on representation across industries and diverse perspectives on this work.

The convening was held on Thursday, February 13, 2025 from 2 - 4pmET via Zoom. Paulette Granberry Russell, NADOHE president, provided opening remarks and context for the origins of the convening. The event featured three speakers offering introductory comments:

- **Dr. Daryl Smith**, professor emeritus at Claremont Graduate University, offered perspectives on the intersection of dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in a society that is inherently diverse and the importance of centering this work within organizational mission, vision, and values.
- **Effenus Henderson**, retired corporate diversity leader and co-founder of the Institute for Sustainable Diversity and Inclusion, presented his SPINE model; a framework for strategy, practice and focus, innovation and problem-solving, needs assessment, and execution and accountability specific to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion goals within organizations. He also presented an emerging ten-part framework on humanocratic inclusion.
- **Jesse Moore**, founder and CEO of Common Thread Strategies and former Obama Administration official, offered policy perspectives and communication insights on narrative construction, the value of persuasion, the necessity of coalition building, and key steps for organizations looking to improve communication specific to diversity, equity, and inclusion topics.

Upon conclusion of each talk, the speaker posed a question for virtual response to participants that generated data collection. Each speaker individually, and collectively, engaged in dialogue through questions from the participants.

The **Amplifying Student Voices** event was held in October 2024, approximately four weeks prior to the presidential election. Campaign rhetoric regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion was high and students were aware of potential changes within their university communities. Student protests, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinean conflict, were prevalent.

Restorative Communities of Practice was held in November 2024, approximately one week after the presidential election. The newly elected Trump administration was already vocal regarding proposed changes to higher education, support for dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, loss of funding, and the imminent closure of the Department of Education. Many attendees were facing job loss, office closures, and staff dismissal. There was a strong sense of fear, concern, and exhaustion across attendees and the content for this day was certainly framed by the timing.

The **Future Vista Impact Summit** virtual convening was held in February 2025, approximately three weeks after the Trump administration took office. At this time, Executive Orders had been issued intending to end diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts broadly, research funding was being cut, the Department of Education was preparing for closure, and hiring and funding freezes were beginning across higher education. Major corporations were announcing the end of longstanding programs, efforts, and positions to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. This made attendance at the Summit impossible for some and concerning for others. The level of uncertainty and rapidly changing landscape shaped the content for this event.

EVALUATION APPROACH

Summative evaluations examine the overall quality and outcomes of a program or initiative. These evaluations are conducted for decision-making purposes and determine whether the program or initiative has met its intended outcomes and overall value-add to programmatic efforts. This evaluation occurs at the end of an initiative with a retrospective and holistic scope that assesses all program aspects including delivery, activities, impacts, and defined outcomes. However, it is important to note that the work of this initiative will continue to evolve as the organizations seek to meet the needs of an everchanging and highly contentious landscape.

Key considerations for this evaluation include:

- What are student perspectives on the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education and how will these learnings shape NADOHE's strategic priorities and future offerings?
- What do higher education diversity leaders posit as the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and what is needed from NADOHE to support them as strategic leaders?
- In what ways can NADOHE form collaborations, coalitions, and partnerships across industries to strategically drive the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in an evolving sociopolitical context?
- In what ways is the current narrative regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education helping or harming progress and what future narrative is needed to ensure necessary change is attainable?
- In what ways could NADOHE use project data to evolve the organizational strategic plan and offerings in response to constituent feedback and environmental needs?

The Future Vista Impact Initiative evaluation was guided by five key attributes - feasibility, utility, accuracy, propriety, and evaluation - established by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation in 1994. The evaluation prioritized feasibility through extensive consultation with NADOHE leadership and the project planning team throughout development and implementation. Utility was ensured by tailoring information to serve NADOHE

leadership and membership, philanthropic supporters, the broader higher education community, and stakeholders invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion's future. Accuracy was maintained by triangulating data across multiple artifacts to identify themes, which were discussed with the planning team while preserving evaluator objectivity. The NADOHE leadership reviewed evaluation documents and could request additional analysis areas. The evaluation upheld proprietary standards by aligning conclusions with grant proposal expectations and allowing NADOHE leadership discretion in distributing findings to stakeholders. Throughout this process, comprehensive documentation was maintained, offering an honest, detailed account of both the evaluation process and emerging themes, with a focus on improvement and accountability.

In addition to the Joint Committee approach, the AAC&U Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation™ Campus Center **framework** offered important insight into the development and implementation of this project. The framework includes two foundational principles - narrative shifting through truth telling and racial healing through trust and relationship building - that offered important guideposts for outcomes of this project. The TRHT framework includes three areas - separation, economy, and law - that offered helpful positionality in consideration of improving equitable outcomes. Given the evolving situational context, the area considering the just application of the law emerged as important.

While the Future Vista Impact Initiative did not explicitly engage faculty through the three events, findings from the recent **Academic Freedom and Civil Discourse in Higher Education: A National Study of Faculty Attitudes and Perceptions** publication offered framing for the consideration of how current and impending legislation, national and campus climate, and the current and future state of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are shaping academic freedom.

Data Collection

A mixed methods approach was utilized in each phase of the project to offer multiple points of triangulation across the experience. It is important to note that the project planning team took great care to consider the lived experiences of project participants in light of the national attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Many of those engaging in project phases personally hold

identities under attack, lead programming that is in question, or have or are threatened with job loss. Many work in states where participation in the phases was banned through legislation action and adjustments were made to the phase offerings to provide access and collect insights in safe ways. It was important that the data collection efforts were comprehensive yet thoughtful to the context in which this project was being offered.

Phase specific data collection methods are outlined below. However, planning team meeting agendas, notes, and grant documents were also collected and used to evaluate alignment with intended outcomes.

Phase One: Amplifying Student Voices

Data were collected through three approaches for this phase of the work:

Mural Boards: This collaborative online platform provided student access to individual reflection activities, partner activities, and group conversations.

Student Reflection: Upon completion of the convening, students were asked to respond to a prompt of their choosing:

- What will it look like, feel like, and be like to attend a higher education institution where there is no longer a false belief in a hierarchy of human value? Where every person feels they belong and has an opportunity to succeed?
- How would you describe a fully inclusive democracy?
- What is needed to heal divisions and create common ground across diverse communities, so that we can work together to realize a more just future?
- What are necessary steps in the process?
- What actions are you committing to after the convening?

Students were given the opportunity to respond in writing, through audio or video recordings, or through creative means such as drawings or poetry.

Convening Survey: Students were provided a post-event survey that requested feedback on the experience and the intended outcomes of the event.

Phase Two: Restorative Communities of Practice

Data were collected through two approaches for this phase of the work:

Mural Boards: This collaborative online platform was utilized throughout the event to allow participants access to individual reflection activities, partner activities, and group conversations.

Convening Survey: Participants were provided a post-event survey that included feedback on the experience as well as the intended outcomes of the event. Due to initial low response, the survey was reopened to gain additional perspectives.

Phase Three: Future Vista Impact Summit

Data were collected through three approaches for this phase of the work:

Mentimeter Surveys: During the Impact Summit, each speaker posed one question to the audience via Mentimeter. As responses populated, the facilitator engaged the audience via Zoom chat and asked speakers to respond to audience perspectives.

Virtual Convening Survey: Participants were provided a post-event survey that included feedback on the event experience as well as intended outcomes of the event.

Speaker Documents: Each speaker was asked to submit a short document detailing key takeaways from their contributions during the event as well as a brief paper with perspectives on the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts broadly and specific to higher education.

The Summit was not recorded so participants could authentically engage.

Data Analysis

Given the structure of this project, a qualitative dominant mixed methods approach was utilized. This allowed for review of general quantitative data - primarily post-event survey responses regarding experience - with a greater focus on qualitative data found through Mural Boards, presentations, virtual chat collection, and reflections. Thematic analysis was used to examine themes and patterns of meaning within the data. This analysis included review and coding for consideration of explicit and implicit meanings within the data. This process was designed to deliver insights on the key questions of greatest interest to NADOHE and the planning team and to offer perspectives and recommendations for the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts both in higher education and broadly.

Initial Dissemination & Contributions

Conference Presentations

The planning team had opportunities to share emerging findings through presentations at the:

- NADOHE Annual Conference, March 2025, Chicago, IL
- NAPSA Vice President for Student Affairs Institute, March 2025, New Orleans, LA
- NASPA Annual Conference, March 2025, New Orleans, LA
- AAC&U Conference on Learning & Student Success, April 2025, San Juan, PR

NADOHE Board of Directors

Across the project, NADOHE president, Paulette Granberry Russell, has provided regular updates and insights to the NADOHE Board regarding the Future Vista Impact Summit.

Future Vista Impact Initiative Report

This evaluation serves as a foundational report to NADOHE and will become the framework for subsequent reports and publications to the community, philanthropies, and coalition partners.

NADOHE Chief Diversity Officer & Membership Surveys

- The project planning team met with the Rankin Climate team to discuss the 2025 Chief Diversity Officers survey. The team subsequently reviewed the draft survey questions and offered feedback in alignment with project planning and emerging findings.
- As NADOHE finalizes a plan for the next iteration its membership survey, project materials and emerging findings will inform questions.

EMERGING FINDINGS: KEY INSIGHTS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The following themes detail insights gathered across participants engaged in the three phases of the Future Vista Impact Initiative followed by their desired considerations for the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Phase One: Amplifying Student Voices

Of the 450+ student participants, 124 offered feedback via the post-event survey with a majority indicating the experience met or exceeded expectations. 70 percent reported feeling confident that the experience will shape their thinking moving forward. Students reported feeling “validated” and “affirmed” through the opportunity to engage in this dialogue.

Amplifying Student Voices included two framing questions that were unique to the student population and deserved intentional data analysis separate from overall key insights.

QUESTION #1:

What would be characteristics and/or practices of higher education institutions where there is no longer a false belief in the hierarchy of human value?

Overwhelmingly, students identified the valuing of diverse perspectives and the creation of safe spaces where all voices are prioritized as key indicators of an educational environment where there is no longer a false belief in the hierarchy of human value. Students identified the provision of supports and services to improve equity while also removing the stigma to use these resources as critical. Removing barriers to entry and mitigating power imbalances between students, faculty, and administrators are reported benefits. Students shared environments should include intentional engagement of diverse populations for decision-making and an end of current performative practices. Students indicated that educational environments would feel less stressful because those engaged would not be reacting out of fear and judgment. Students believed that this would lessen imposter syndrome and improve classroom engagement while taking steps to heal existing divisions. It would result in intentional dialogue between groups to genuinely learn and understand perspectives rather than asserting a personal agenda. Use of the terms “welcoming,” “encouraging,” “safe,” and “validating” were commonly used by students.

“It would feel like walking into any space and feeling valued and treated fairly for your unique perspectives and not treated as though someone else’s experiences are more important or significant. An environment that is open and encouraging.”

“People would be able to feel safe wherever they are, have more opportunities, and fight for solutions alongside each other even if the problem doesn’t directly affect them.”

“Learning to love yourself would be a lot easier in a community where a hierarchy of human value doesn’t exist.”

QUESTION #2:

What aspects of our current democracy are working and representative of diverse groups and viewpoints? What aspects of our current democracy need to change to be fully inclusive?

Students expressed appreciation for the foundational principles of democracy and the opportunity for US citizens to have basic human rights, freedom and speech and expression, and diversity of thought. These sentiments were often expressed in comparison to other countries where democracy is not present. Students acknowledged the value of free and fair elections and the opportunity for many to engage safely in the process and express opposition. However, these sentiments were tempered with concerns of threats to these basic freedoms in the impending election cycle. Students across institutions signaled excitement by a growing number of college students engaging in the democratic process and strengthened grassroots organizing.

"Young people and students are organizing across the country on issues they care about and think are important. It's that grassroots level organizing that I hope creates change."

"Freedom of speech can be our democracy's greatest tool in uplifting diverse viewpoints and perspectives. However, it is threatened when only some voices are heard and valued."

However, students shared strong concerns regarding the current state of democracy and fear that basic human rights are in jeopardy given the current political climate. Voter suppression and impediments to hearing and including the voices of diverse communities in the democratic process was a common theme. Students expressed concern that there are too many obstacles in the democratic process and citizens do not have enough understanding of how systems and procedures work to be actively engaged. This, along with waning accountability and transparency, drives loss of trust in the system. Partisan politics, polarization, and campaign financing driving decision-making were raised as red flags. Strong sentiments were shared regarding the need to overhaul the Electoral College.

"It's everything. Voter suppression tactics, a lack of access to education, underrepresentation of minority group voices at all levels of government. It leads to inaccurate representation of what constituents actually want."

"We need to expand voting rights and access and reform the Electoral College. We need more representation in elected office for different perspectives. We need to address income inequality and criminal justice reform. Using restorative justice approaches and diverse leadership training. We need more civic engagement in schools so people actually understand the process."

Students reinforced the need for equity in decision-making, a reinvestment in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at all levels of the government, and protection of marginalized groups as essential to the democratic process.

"A government that provides accurate and truthful information, lifts up communities, and encourages equity and inclusion."

Key Insights

Prioritizing Belonging, Inclusion, and Cultural Relevance: Students want institutional leadership, particularly faculty, to proactively embody diversity, equity, and inclusion values to build trust. Students acknowledge trust across higher education has eroded given the challenging sociopolitical climate. They desire integration of culturally responsive curricula and support services with prompt action taken on relevant student feedback.

"Creating spaces for students to share their voices and being part of the whole community is critical in building trust. This isn't about just being comfortable, it is about students feeling safe."

"Leaders need to really familiarize themselves with the communities they are serving. This helps them become more culturally competent in decision-making and lessens inequality."

Intentional and Meaningful Leadership: Students broadly desire leaders who model inclusive behaviors, prioritize cultural competence education, communicate with transparency, and include inclusion-related competencies in performance plans. Students described this as promoting an environment that reduces stigma, bias, and microaggressions as a pathway toward inclusive learning and co-curricular experiences.

"We need educators in higher education who do not feel a sense of superiority or perpetuate that belief. We need leaders who are welcoming and approachable to all."

Elevating Student Voice and Impact: Students vocalized a demand for dismantling educational hierarchies that provide more opportunity for student engagement and integrating equitable practices and student voice in decision-making, resource allocation, and governance. This included a desire to move beyond performative engagement of students and to intentionally engage students beyond the traditional ask (student leaders, student government) and to hear the voices of those engaged less frequently.

"When student voices are heard and accepted, big improvements are seen and felt in campus culture."

"Student voices are necessary for universities to function."

Increased Institutional Accountability: Students signaled the importance of creative intentional and measurable diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts - particularly in classrooms - where accountability is generated through leadership commitment, independent accrediting bodies, and ongoing assessment and evaluation. This contributes to a growing narrative surrounding the need to better document how diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are benefitting the campus community broadly.

"The idea of creating that sense of belonging and fairness on college campuses is to abolish the systems that higher education operates in."

"We need to be teaching the necessity of diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses. We can't just assume everyone knows."

"Policies, norms, and standards must be critically and continually evaluated to gauge alignment with community values and desired outcomes for students and stakeholders."

Consistent Dialogue Spaces: Students identified the need for safe and continuous spaces for meaningful discussion of issues related to identity and social justice. Students acknowledge that, on some campuses, physical spaces or designated times exist but students report feeling ill equipped to utilize these spaces effectively for dialogue and engagement. They desire spaces that include interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

"As students, we really need structures that create spaces for dialogue, care, and support."

"Educators need to promote open communication and expression in their classrooms to create effective dialogue in academic settings."

Future Considerations

Stronger Relationships and Feedback Loops: Students spoke at length about relationships with institutional leaders being transactional. They desire opportunities for moving beyond the transactional into meaningful and relatable connections where challenging conversations can be had in safe spaces; particularly regarding the current political challenges, threats to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion, and institutional response to these situations. Students desire the establishment of regular and transparent channels for students to provide feedback on campus policies and services. They urge leadership to communicate and take actionable steps in response.

"Leaders need to build meaningful and intentional relationships with students as creating those bonds helps ensure a sense of belonging."

"The leaders at our universities were in our (students) shoes at some points. It would go a long way if they would acknowledge that."

Promote Student Representation: Students prioritized the inclusion of a cross-sectional body of students to be partners in the co-creation of their educational experiences through involvement in decisions about curriculum and campus governance. Students should be at the table beyond one-time or performative opportunities and selecting a representative sample of students should be of greater priority.

"Make student engagement more democratic. Student representation should be in all areas of the university. We need to normalize creation of student advisory boards that work closely with the university leadership."

"If more student voices were heard and accepted, it would make a big improvement in campus culture."

"We need campus inclusion. We need more than just a body of people, we need an intentional community to make overall choices about our institution."

Dialogue Facilitation and Conflict Resolution: Students reported being encouraged to engage in challenging discussions regarding current events and the impact on higher education, but do not feel equipped with leadership skills in dialogue facilitation and conflict resolution. They desire more opportunities to build these skills through formal classroom learning, co-curricular experiences, and practical opportunities in supportive environments.

"We need to deconstruct power dynamics in a way that promotes flexible conflict resolution and we need the skills to be able to do that."

"Today, students need more mentorship and personalized instruction with restorative conflict resolution."

Enhance Civic Engagement: Students desire greater and more intentional education about civic responsibility and issues concerning higher education, diversity, equity, and inclusion, global issues, and their experiences as students. This includes both academic classroom experience, co-curricular opportunities, and experiential learning. Students encouraged leadership to foster spaces for dialogue on key issues that are shaping both national conversations and higher education specific issues.

"At our institution, we are concerned about income inequality and the need to reform the Electoral College in order to achieve an inclusive democracy."

"We need to improve civic education to ensure students and citizens understand their rights and the mechanisms of government."

Expand Mental Health and Well-Being Efforts: Students expressed appreciation for institutional mental health and well-being services and would appreciate greater intentionality in partnering those resources next to or within diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, ensuring they are accessible and culturally responsive. Services are often presented as a monolith and not adaptable to the unique needs of a diverse student community.

"All student services should be culturally responsive but mental health services and academic advising need to be designed for the unique needs of diverse students."

Phase Two: Restorative Communities of Practice

Sixty-eight participants provided feedback on the post-event survey with 70 percent reporting being very or extremely satisfied with their experience. 75 percent of respondents expressed confidence that their decision to engage in the event would have positive impacts on their future work. Overwhelming, participants expressed impending legislation and the impacts to higher education as their primary concern for higher education.

Key Insights

Embed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into Plans, Policies, and Data:

Leaders must embed diversity, equity, and inclusion topics into institutional, divisional, and unit strategic plans, advocate for policy change, and use coalitions and data to counter anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion rhetoric. This requires a commitment to move beyond performative statements and approaches and to align with actionable and measurable plans for implementing change.

"It's often performative. We put diversity, equity, and inclusion into our mission and values statements but, once a challenge happens or a budget cut is needed, it's like none of it matters anymore."

Adaptive Strategies and Transparent Communication Build Trust:

Participants broadly describe institutional response to diversity, equity, and inclusion needs as reactive and without strategy. Institutions need adaptive plans that anticipate challenges as well as the evolving landscape of higher education and student populations. To be successful, this requires transparent communication across multiple audiences to build trust and credibility.

"This will take a reconsideration of current approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion, organizational change in higher education, and a sober willingness to try something new if it is determined that existing models do not work."

Coalition Building: Participants shared continued frustration regarding the siloed approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion on many campuses and

that lack of shared leadership across divisions or areas. Participants desire collaboration across campus stakeholders and external partners that foster shared ownership of diversity, equity, and inclusion work to create broader resource mobilization and accountability. Participants also desired more opportunities to think about coalition building outside of higher education or to consider distributed models such as **Shared Equity Leadership** but were unsure where to begin this process.

"We need NADOHE providing resources to institutions and developing partnerships with other professional organizations and accrediting bodies to collaborate on common ground in order to move forward."

"At a minimum, our work needs to be in greater collaboration across the educational spectrum - bridging K-12 with postsecondary education."

Student Engagement Powers Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Innovation: As student protests were still a present conversation at the time of the convening, participants discussed how activism is a driving factor in innovation regarding response. This includes new approaches to engaging students in dialogue regarding university governance and policies, extending beyond traditional engagement with student government, and identifying proactive student engagement improvements beyond moments of crisis.

"It should be our goal to create environments where student activism is seen as a valuable contribution to the university's progress rather than a distraction."

"As leaders, we have to be more proactive with the voices of students and giving them the platform to have their voices heard. This will educate them and prepare them for the future to elevate diverse voices and promote advocacy."

Community is Essential: As diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders navigate the chilling effect of prohibitive legislation on their work, they expressed sentiments of exhaustion, frustration, and despair. They discussed grappling with these changes both personally and professionally while also trying to lead teams who are worried and at threat of job loss. Concurrently, they shared a

continued commitment to this work and placed importance on finding new approaches to advancing efforts despite challenges. Leaders stressed the need for community and peer relationships and a desire for continued events, conversations, and communication across participants to strengthen support.

"How do we continue these spaces? We become islands when we return to our offices. We are in different spaces but there are some things that are standard. Can do this through the NADOHE chapters."

"More intentional spaces to support self-reflexive work for diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals."

Phase Three: Future Vista Impact Summit

GUIDING QUESTION:

What would be characteristics and/or practices of higher education institutions where there is no longer a false belief in the hierarchy of human value?

Community Responsibility and Impact: Across industries, organizations see diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as "essential" and "imperative" for serving their communities effectively. Participants believe their organizations and institutions should be reflective of the communities they serve while also serving the specific needs of those communities.

"Being a good steward of our community in which we sit and serve is essential to our work."

Innovation and Future Sustainability: Being thoughtful about implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts fosters innovation, creativity, and organizational relevance that is important to the current and future success of organizations. Participants describe inclusion as "inextricably linked" to innovation.

"We must make the most of a full mix of people to innovate and sustainably solve the world's most complex challenges"

“Through inclusion, we are ensuring we are relevant, ensuring collaboration, and ensuring innovation”

Educational Excellence and Student Success: Summit participants expressed strong sentiments that diversity, equity, and inclusion work is central to the mission, vision, and values of higher education and contributes to organizations broadly through workforce development.

“We cannot do great teaching and research if we do not attract the widest possible range of talent”

GUIDING QUESTION:

What do you see as the greatest strategy for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the face of growing resistance?

Participants responded to a multiple choice question and ranked the following options in order of importance:

- Embedding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Principles into institutional and Organizational Strategy Documents
- Expanding Strategic Partnerships and Community Engagement
- Strengthening Legal and Policy Advocacy for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts
- Leveraging Data and Technology to Drive Accountability

GUIDING QUESTION:

What stories are we not telling about our work that might help bridge divides and build broader understanding of why inclusive practices matter?

Narratives and Framing have Missed the Mark: For too long, higher education has positioned diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as being for specific populations and not benefitting the entire community. Much of the narrative has focused on race and it has been unclear the many ways diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts benefit many populations. There is now a call to shift the conversation and utilize storytelling to change perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This work will take a strategic reframing to change public perceptions and understand and not simply a rebranding.

“If we can’t change minds, we must change the conversation.”

Broader Benefits of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: In alignment with shifting narratives, participants discussed the need to elevate stories emphasizing how diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts positively impact all groups, not just marginalized communities. Stories specific to the benefits within higher education are needed but also across industries.

“Students who know how to work effectively with people who are different from themselves have an advantage in the global workplace.”

“Diversity is more than color, race, belief. It is stories about diversity of thought, lived experiences, points of view.”

Unseen and Underreported Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Work: To shift a national narrative regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, including stories about behind-the-scenes efforts, infrastructure changes, and systemic shifts that often go unnoticed will be necessary to strengthen understanding and support.

“We don’t tell the stories of the invisible work we do to keep our institutional houses in order. Climate studies. HR primers on mitigating bias.”

Diversity Equity, and Inclusion in Learning and Work: Higher education, in particular, has not successfully communicated the relationship between diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within colleges and universities and the broad impacts upon post-completion outcomes, career success, and workforce development. A narrative regarding the benefits of diverse perspectives gained through higher education is lost.

“Too often, we are sharing the tools and approaches to do diversity, equity, and inclusion work and we are not sharing the outcomes.”

“We aren’t telling the human centered stories of how diversity work impacts mission and business success.”

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

In considering data and insights from the three events comprising the Future Vista Impact Initiative, the following themes emerged:

1. Embedding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Principles in Institutional and Organizational Infrastructure

After many years of institutions and organizations adding performative diversity, equity, and inclusion statements to mission and vision statements and websites, it is time to shift to fully integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into strategic plans, policies, and data systems. This is consistent with sentiments that intentional application with action plans and resources is a step in shifting a narrative that this work benefits all and not some. Leaders recognize that when budget cuts occur, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are often the first to be eliminated if not structurally embedded and this is a signal of the current performative nature of the work.

2. The Necessity of Narrative Reframing Regarding the Societal Value of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts

Across all events, there is recognition that higher education has failed to effectively communicate how diversity, equity, and inclusion benefits all students and the broader community. Beyond this, higher education has failed to effectively communicate the broader societal value of diversity, equity, and inclusion resulting from college going and completion. There's a call to shift from framing diversity, equity, and inclusion as only benefiting marginalized groups to highlighting its role in fostering innovation, preparing students for global workplaces, and enhancing educational excellence.

3. Strategic and Intentional Cross-Sector Collaboration and Coalition Building To Restore Trust

Leaders express frustration with siloed approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion work and desire more collaboration across campus units, with external partners, and between K-12 and higher education institutions. Students echoed these sentiments with belief that diversity, equity, and

inclusion is often positioned within certain offices or certain staff and, most often, is aligned with race and not other identities. There is little evidence of strategic collaborations or coalitions - particularly between higher education and other industries - to advance a new narrative or to consider innovation regarding the future of this work. Leaders express being interested but uncertain where to begin. Embedded within these conversations were mentions of eroding trust between university leaders and students and between the broader population and higher education. A goal of coalition building and collaboration can be to restore trust and establish collaborative relationships that benefit all.

4. Culturally Responsive Mental Health and Well-being Integration within Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts for Both Students and Professionals

Students specifically identified the need for mental health services that are culturally responsive and integrated with campus diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, recognizing that one-size-fits-all approaches don't address diverse student needs. However, leadership conversations also noted the need to expand culturally-responsive well-being support and community building to navigate the continued stress and anxiety caused through legislation, institutional change, and supporting teams facing uncertainty.

5. Balancing Crisis Response with Proactive Strategy

As the Future Vista Impact Initiative occurred in the aftermath of national student protests, consideration of institutional response became a theme of discussion. There was recognition that many diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives arise reactively from student activism or crises, but institutions need to develop adaptive, forward-looking strategies that anticipate challenges rather than merely responding to them. This requires systemic change, careful review of policies and procedures, and a commitment from leadership to advance efforts.

6. Authentic Student Engagement Beyond Performative Representation

Both students and leaders consistently emphasized the need for meaningful collaboration in institutional decision-making and understanding. This includes a move from performative student engagement in public-facing opportunities toward intentional representation, improved transparency, and

purposeful dialogue and education regarding institutional decision-making. Students explicitly desire representation in curriculum development, campus governance, and strategic planning that goes beyond traditional student government channels. Leaders acknowledge that the constantly changing environment is thwarting efforts to communicate clearly and consistently with students regarding decisions.

7. Improved Leadership Accountability and Modeling Inclusive Behaviors

Both students and institutional leaders highlight the importance of leadership who demonstrate cultural competence, transparency, and genuine commitment to inclusion as a pathway toward restoring trust and relationship building. Students continue to perceive institutional efforts regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion as performative and that institutional leaders, and faculty, perpetuate this culture. Leaders acknowledge the persistent challenge of being required to carry out institutional action in response to legislative changes that are in direct opposition to student demands and personal beliefs.

8. Need for Safe, Continuous Dialogue Spaces for Both Students and Professionals

While the need for dialogue spaces is often aligned with students, leaders also discussed the imperative for spaces and communities to process current events, institutional response, and personal reactions. Students specifically request dedicated spaces for meaningful discussions about identity and social justice issues that go beyond physical spaces but also training on facilitation skills to engage in productive dialogues across differences.

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE

This section includes recommendations and future considerations for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education and beyond while navigating a contentious political climate:

A Multi-Pronged Approach

To advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the current environment, NADOHE will need to consider multiple pathways for serving different audiences. This includes approaches for engaging the public regarding the societal value of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education, the policy and advocacy community, and cross-sector coalitions. This external focus will need to partner with a continued focus on serving diversity leaders on campuses who need practical solutions and support for everyday efforts as well as updated professional standards for guidance.

Shifting the National Narrative

It is imperative for NADOHE to lead the charge toward shifting the national narrative regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and beyond. The Future Vista Impact Initiative clearly identified the key issue of higher education positioning these efforts as being for specific populations and not the broader community. Too often, the focus is on what is being offered and not the broader societal outcomes of this important work. NADOHE has an opportunity to update and reimagine existing resources, guides, and toolkits, to partner with communications experts, and to launch a national campaign to shift the rhetoric plaguing progress.

Establishing Cross-Sector Coalitions for Change

The Impact Summit highlighted the absence of current collaborations within higher education and across the broader set of industries represented. Given the impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts nationally, creating cross-sector collaborations for improved communication, knowledge sharing, resource generation, and improved data is imperative and a gap NADOHE is positioned to fill. This includes intentional coalitions with existing entities

engaged in this work (e.g., University of Southern California Race and Equity Center, Pen America, Education Trust) to advance a level of national coordination. Collaborations could offer key pathways to shifting the narrative on the societal value of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Advancing Policy and Advocacy Efforts

As NADOHE has recently entered the legal area with a lawsuit against the current presidential administration, continuing this work is imperative. NADOHE could consider a policy and advocacy infrastructure to include:

- developing a rapid response team of legal and policy experts who can provide timely analysis of emerging legislation and court rulings
- creating accessible resources and toolkits that help institutions understand compliance requirements while maintaining their commitment to inclusive excellence
- coordinating with higher education associations and civil rights organizations to strategically engage in key legal cases
- providing professional development for diversity officers on effectively advocating within institutional governance structures.

NADOHE should emphasize building institutional capacity for evidence-based advocacy that demonstrates the educational and societal benefits of diversity initiatives. This approach would position NADOHE as both a knowledge resource and a strategic partner for institutions seeking to advance inclusive practices within evolving legal parameters.

Amplifying Student Voices

To move beyond performative offerings and to deliver upon student demands, NADOHE needs to play a critical role in continuing to offer and identify avenues for diverse student voices to be uplifted in intentional spaces. Moreover, NADOHE could play an important role in providing necessary training regarding dialogue, facilitation, conflict resolution, and advocacy in partnership with colleges and universities.

APPENDICES

Amplifying Student Voices Host Sites

Agnes Scott College
Anne Arundel Community College
Anoka-Ramsey Community College & Anoka Technical College
Baldwin Wallace University
Bradley University
California Institute of Integral Studies
California State University Long Beach
College of Southern Maryland
College Unbound
Columbia College
DePaul University
Emory University
George Mason University
Gwynedd Mercy University
Indiana Institute of Technology
Kansas State University
Lafayette College
Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, School of Nursing
McDaniel College
MGH Institute of Health Professions
Michigan State University
Middlesex Community College
Northern Michigan University
Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine
Pratt Institute
Prince George's Community College
Queensborough Community College, CUNY
Santa Clara University
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Southwestern University
University of California, Irvine
University of Maryland Baltimore County
University of Michigan-Flint
University of Nebraska at Omaha

University of Pittsburgh
University of St. Thomas
University of Toledo
University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
Virginia Tech
Westminster University

Restorative Communities of Practice Host Sites

Agosto Justice Center at South Texas College of Law Houston
Columbia University
Joliet Junior College
Oberlin College
Stanford University
University of Dayton
University of Louisville
University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC)
University of Vermont
Wayne County Community College District
Emory University
Gwynedd Mercy University (GMercyU)
Loyola Marymount University (Southern CA)
MGH Institute of Health Professions
Middlesex Community College
Washington University in St. Louis
Western Michigan University