

The MA Department of Higher Education's Journey Toward Racial Equity and Organizational Change

"An equity-minded organization is better prepared to create the policy scheme needed to serve our historically excluded students and their institutions better." -Commissioner Santiago.

August 10, 2022



MASSACHUSETTS
Department of
Higher Education

Welcome

Introductions

- Carlos Santiago, Commissioner
- Stacy Bougie, Director of Organizational Development and Cultural Transformation
- Alison Connolly, Senior Associate Director for Financial Aid Programs
- Tanya Steward, Executive Assistant to the Commissioner

Together with Dr. Shaun Harper of the USC Race & Equity Center, DHE staff developed the following “Engagement Agreements” during our 2019–2020 Equity Institutes as a pact with ourselves and each other for how to show up in our community conversations:



BRAVE SPACE:

This is a “brave space” which is a bit different from a “safe space.” A brave space encourages seeking understanding through dialogue and mutual accountability, but can be uncomfortable.



USE “I” STATEMENTS:

“I” statements keep the focus on your own thoughts and feelings, facilitating empathy and avoiding assumptions or accusations about others’ thoughts and feelings.



OOPS AND OUCH:

If you say something that comes out wrong, say “oops.” If someone in the room says something in a way that feels bad, say “ouch.” Mistakes are normal, and harm can be mended. Along similar lines, these cues are for those of us in the room to engage with one another. Please do not call out people who are not in the room for past mistakes.



STEP UP, STEP BACK:

If you find that you are speaking less than others in the room, consider stepping up and speaking more. If you are speaking more than others in the room, please step back and leave room for others to speak.



CONTINUOUS CONVERSATIONS:

These conversations need not and should not end when this gathering ends. Please keep reflecting and discussing.



BEING PRESENT:

Please do not allow yourself to be distracted by your phone, email, or work during this conversation. For virtual meetings, if you’re comfortable and able to, please keep your video camera on.



BEING MINDFUL OF NON-VERBAL CUES:

Be aware of your facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and other nonverbal communication, as these can speak louder than words.



BEING MINDFUL OF POWER DYNAMICS:

Be mindful of power dynamics that may disrupt interpersonal interactions, including but not limited to dynamics between managers and non-managers.

Reflection/Guiding Questions



**“If they don’t
give you a
seat at the
table, bring
a folding
chair.”**

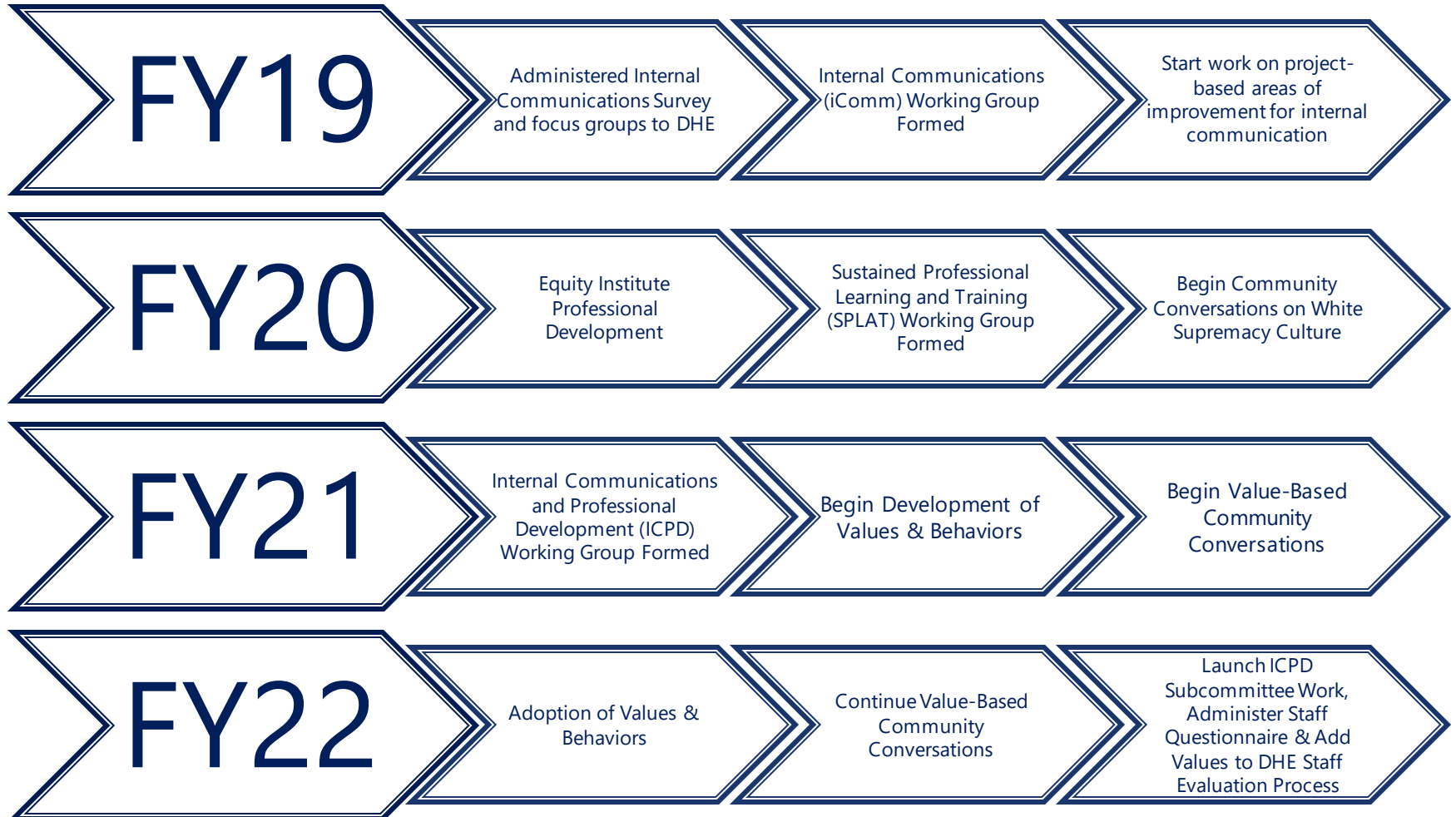
- Shirley Chisholm

Guiding Questions

- Who still needs to bring a folding chair to the table in your agency?
- What would real transformation look like and how do we move towards operating systems of higher education that look like the constituencies we serve?

Background

Historical Overview



Key Findings

- Access to information was contingent on position, project portfolio, length of employment, social capital, etc.
- Onboarding at the MADHE varied by manager and there was not a standard process
- MADHE staff members wanted improved communication with other teams across the agency and divisions
- Most information was shared in the written form via memos and there was no place to access or find the information later

iComm + SPLAT = ICPD

IComm

- **Internal Communications (iComm) Team Objective**

To develop helpful resources and identify how we can improve the way we communicate amongst ourselves, the Board, and campus colleagues. To examine gaps that exist in how we find important information and create helpful systems that will make the office more efficient.

- Internal Communication Staff Survey and Focus Groups
- Internal Communications Project Work
 - Intranet
 - Staff Meeting Revamp
 - Staff Bios
 - Onboarding
 - Information Sharing

SPLAT

- **Sustainable Learning and Training (SPLAT) Team Objective**

Develop a multi-dimensional approach to sustainable professional development and internal communication regarding the Equity Agenda. We seek to weave the Equity Agenda into every staff member's work and daily responsibilities with intentionality and thoughtfulness, even if at first blush, it would not apply. We will develop and utilize a common vocabulary and maintain an ongoing dialogue and awareness on equity.

- DHE Staff Equity Institutes
- Six Equity Projects
- SPLAT Project Plan (3-year plan)
 - Climate/Needs Assessment
 - Equity Coordinator
 - Ongoing PD and Training Plan for Staff tied to Performance

iComm + SPLAT = ICPD

ICPD

- **Internal Communications and Professional Development (ICPD) Team Objective**

Identify ways to improve the culture and internal communications at the DHE, while creating a training and professional development plan for the staff to be successful in their work. ICPD will do this by continuing to look at internal communication issues raised by the staff on an ongoing basis and making recommendations on how to improve those issues through three lenses: equity, internal operations, and professional development.

- Combined the work of iComm and SPLAT
- Focus on Cultural Transformation
- Develop DHE Values

ICPD Guiding Principles

Racial Equity:

- Is the top policy and performance priority for the Department of Higher Education.
- Must permeate the Department's structure, culture, and policies.
- Requires the use of asset-based language to minimize the threat of harm, deficit, and stereotype reinforcement.
- Requires acknowledgement, remedy, and repair of policies and practices which have excluded or created barriers for staff of color.

The Department must:

- Promote a culturally sustainable climate in which all staff can thrive and are regarded in the totality of their human dignity.
- Acknowledge the experience and knowledge of people of color and seek to engage people of color in the pursuit of racial equity in meaningful ways.
- Develop a culture of appreciation where the efforts of staff are uplifted and amplified.
- Be people-centered, prioritizing qualitative over quantitative values, and process over product, with a shared commitment to collaboration, mutual support, and inclusivity."
- Actively work towards dismantling white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001) and advance a cultural transformation which centers racial justice, equally internally and externally.

White Supremacy Culture Characteristics Audit

5 Most Prevalent Norms

The dominant culture that shaped the norms, values, beliefs and standards to advantage white people and oppress People of Color and has been reproduced by all the institutions of our society.

- Perfectionism
- **Sense of Urgency**
- Defensiveness
- **Quantity Over Quality**
- **Worship of the Written Word**
- Only One Right Way
- **Paternalism**
- Either/Or Thinking
- Power Hoarding
- Fear of Open Conflict
- **Individualism**
- I'm the Only One
- Progress Is Bigger, More
- Objectivity
- Right To Comfort

From [*White Supremacy Culture*](#), which lists characteristics and antidotes for each norm Published in 2001 by dRworks

White Supremacy Culture Characteristics Audit

Key Findings



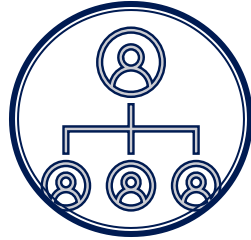
Individualism

- Responses pointed out lack of collaboration or requested a more team-based approach
- Suggestions reinforce individualistic behaviors, while some align well with antidotes



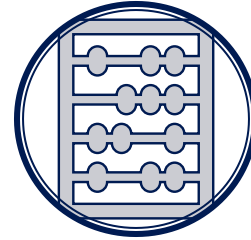
Sense of Urgency

- Comments focus on pitfalls of rushed planning and working on the urgent rather than the important



Paternalism

- Numerous comments on decisions being made and implemented without inclusive staff discussion



Quantity Over Quality

- Comments pointing to lack of attention to process, suggesting productivity is prioritized over process



Worship of the Written Word

- Responses broadly reflect written communication as the comfort zone, while a few suggestions honor other communication skills

Evidence of Success

Small Wins



Gained a better understanding of the racial inequities within the agency and more broadly in higher education

Began the process of building trust and creating a shared language to do this work

Opportunities



Create a shared set of values to commit to and embody this work

Identify and create new policies and processes to undo white supremacy culture characteristics and build an equity-minded culture

Develop an onboarding process including cultural onboarding for new staff

Co-Creating an Equity-Minded Culture

Participatory Leadership

To achieve racial equity, DHE has developed various **formal and informal networks** to catalyze and support staff in developing knowledge, building relationships, and implementing policy changes



Inspired by [National Equity Project](#) and Maggie Potapchuk (*Cultivating Interdependence: A Guide for Race Relations and Racial Justice Organizations*, 2004)

MA DHE Value Statement Creation & Adoption

January

ICPD Workshop
to Develop Values

February

Memo to Staff
Announcing Draft
Values for
Reflection

March

Pulse Survey sent
to staff. What
values and
behaviors
resonate with
you?

April

ICPD meets to
assess the Pulse
Survey

May

Discussion at the
All Staff meeting
about preliminary
pulse survey
findings

June

Focus groups to
delve deeper into
the initial findings
from the Pulse
Survey

July

ICPD worked
through the staff
feedback and
refined the values

August

Focus groups
meet again and
choose a behavior
to practice for the
next month

September

Focus groups
provide final
feedback. What
might be holding
you back from
committing to
this?

October

Staff panel
reports how they
are using the
Values

Memo from
Commissioner
formally adopting
the Values

November

Accountability
pairs created to
practice using the
values

December

Accountability
pairs work on
New Year, New
Val-You activity

MADHE Value Statement

DHE Values

At the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education,
we share these interconnected values:

<p>Equity <i>Understanding and confronting oppression in all its forms</i></p>	<p>Accountability <i>Answering for the outcomes of decisions and actions</i></p>	<p>Community <i>Showing care and respect toward others</i></p>
<p>Empowerment <i>Facilitating others' opportunities for growth and contribution, within teams and across DHE</i></p>	<p>Intentionality <i>Acting with purpose and clarity</i></p>	<p>Teamwork <i>Embracing the power of unity, collaboration, and collective insight</i></p>

Socialization

- New Year New Val-You
- Printed Posters
- Accountability Quads
- Email Signature

Operationalization

- ICPD Subcommittees
 - Increase Information Sharing and Empowerment Among Staff
 - Working Intentionally and Assessing Staff Workloads
 - Community Building and Staff Engagement in the New Work Environment
 - Identifying High-Need Areas of Professional Development

- Cultural Onboarding

Evidence of Success

Small Wins



Adoption of agency-wide Values & Behaviors

Enhanced feeling of community

Increased transparency

Increased receptivity to difficult conversations

Communications via multiple modalities not only the written word

Cultural Onboarding for New Employees

Opportunities



Address role of external environment in implementation of Values & Behaviors

Increase engagement across all levels of staff

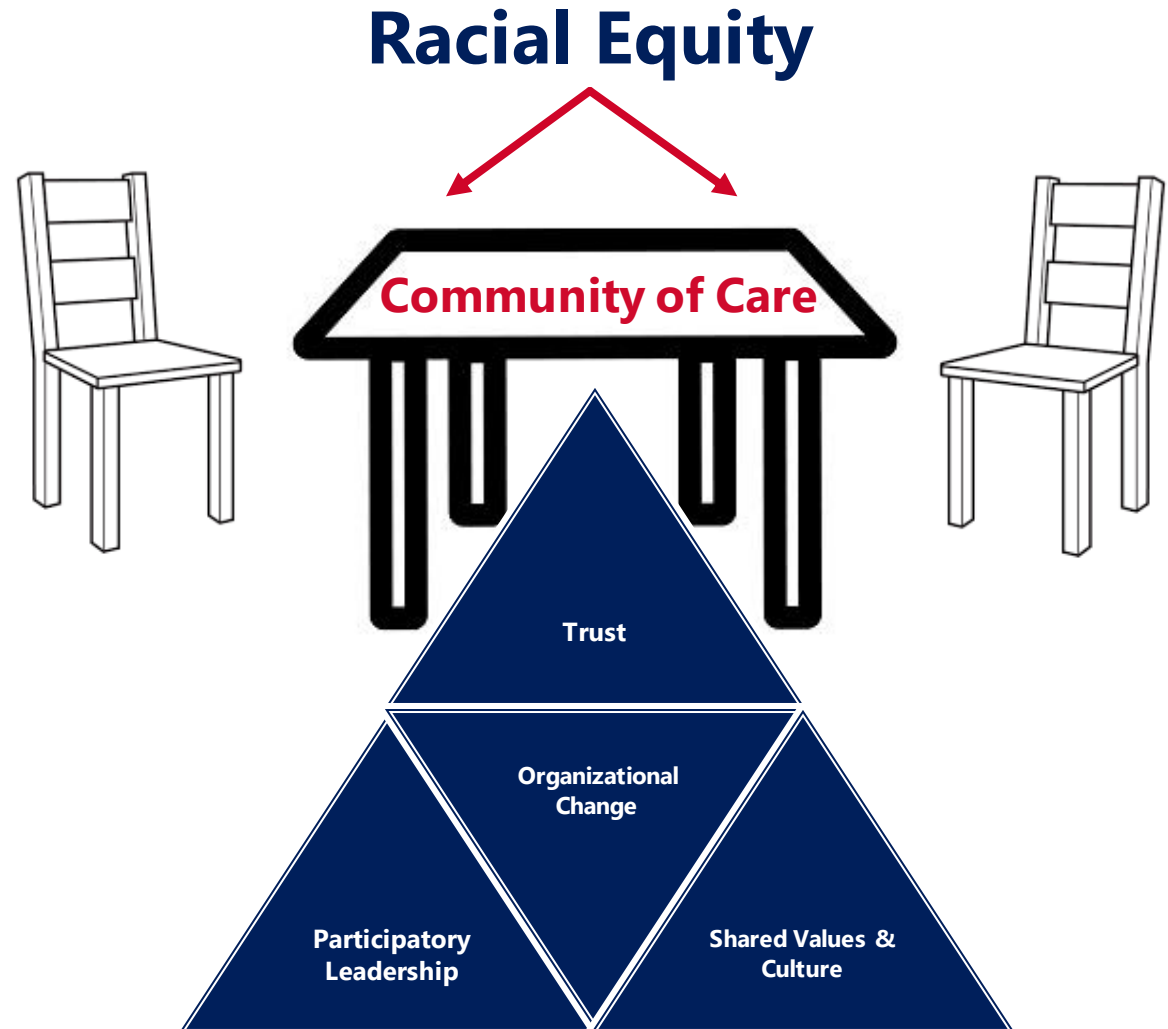
Work towards normalization and operationalization

Building a Community of Care

Building a Community of Care

Bringing Everyone to the Table

- Everyone plays an integral role to an organization's success and has a talent to help contribute to building it up
- If we fail to recognize their importance, we distort the purpose of our organization's values and culture
- The big picture is racial equity and building a culture unified by values and community to create lasting organizational change



2022 Staff Questionnaire

Key Findings

Lowest-scoring questions were:

- How decisions about job titles/reclassifications/promotions and compensation adjustments are made
- **Career advancement (opportunities for upward mobility)**

Highest-scoring questions were:

- Status of the Equity Agenda
- The Department's statutory responsibilities
- **Comfort in asking for help from your manager**
- Adequacy of your primary workspace to do your job

Demographic questions:

- Comparisons between demographic groups (using available data) generally did not reveal great discrepancies.
- Unit/division was the demographic comparison which showed the greatest discrepancies between groups, meaning certain divisions have more structural empowerment than others

Open-ended questions showed recurring themes including:

- **Lack of career advancement opportunities (promotion, pay increase)**
- High workloads
- **Would like more collaboration and communication between unit/divisions**
- Contract employees are due to be converted to FTE status
- Manager and unit/division affect levels of support, work recognition, and opportunity for career growth

Continued Learning Opportunities

- All Staff Meetings run by Staff
- Monthly Community Conversations
- All Staff Professional Developmental
- Monthly Book-Club
- DHE Parent Virtual Lunch Group

Evidence of Success

Small Wins



Stronger sense of community and relationships

Redistribution of power

Acknowledgement and willingness to change old behaviors

Transparency platform via community conversations

Hiring a Director of Equity

Values added to evaluations

Collaboration and sharing across the Education Secretariate

Opportunities



Increased support for technology in the new hybrid workplace

Incorporate culture across teams

Provide ongoing professional development

Continued work to build trust

Sharing and collaborating more broadly across state government

Breakouts

Accountability Quads

- As the face of these policies, is there an honest representation of racial equity within your agency?
- If not, what changes will you make to ensure the organization becomes the pulse of the community it serves?
- What difficulties do you face in this journey?

Questions

Moving Forward