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.
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

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

**FY19**
- Administered Internal Communications Survey and focus groups to DHE
- Internal Communications (iComm) Working Group Formed
- Start work on project-based areas of improvement for internal communication

**FY20**
- Equity Institute Professional Development
- Sustained Professional Learning and Training (SPLAT) Working Group Formed
- Begin Community Conversations on White Supremacy Culture

**FY21**
- Internal Communications and Professional Development (ICPD) Working Group Formed
- Begin Development of Values & Behaviors
- Begin Value-Based Community Conversations

**FY22**
- Adoption of Values & Behaviors
- Continue Value-Based Community Conversations
- Launch ICPD Subcommittee Work, Administer Staff Questionnaire & Add Values to DHE Staff Evaluation Process
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
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
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 polices 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.

Build knowledge, awareness, and skills of every individual to change one’s beliefs and actions, both conscious and unconscious, that serve to perpetuate oppression.

Bringing people together, both within and across groups, to build relationships of trust and solve problems collectively.

Acknowledge, remedy, and repair policies and practices at the agency and system levels that have excluded or created barriers.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and confronting oppression in all its forms</td>
<td>Answering for the outcomes of decisions and actions</td>
<td>Showing care and respect toward others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Intentionality</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating others’ opportunities for growth and contribution, within teams and across DHE</td>
<td>Acting with purpose and clarity</td>
<td>Embracing the power of unity, collaboration, and collective insight</td>
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MADHE Value Statement

Socialization

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

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

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
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

Opportunities
Breakouts
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