

*Prioritizing the Margin: Developing Intentional Strategies to Retain  
Diverse Students, Faculty, and Staff*

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**Abstract**

As the college student population in the United States continues to become more diverse it is imperative that colleges and universities work to recruit and retain faculty and staff that are equally as diverse. While some institutions have created strategies for recruiting minority populations there is still a gap in the research on best practices to successfully retain racial and ethnic minorities, specifically those serving at predominantly White Research 1 Institutions. At Virginia Tech, diversity retention has become a campus-wide priority seeking to improve and maintain representation at the faculty, staff, undergraduate student and graduate student levels. This paper features five administrators from various offices across campus who bring their expertise on retaining underrepresented minority (URM) and underserved populations. The five panelists describe how their work has positively contributed to URM retention through intentional initiatives and policies including but not limited to building sustainable communities, creating inclusive environments, and advocating for the needs of diverse populations. Authors also highlight challenges they have faced with diversity retention as well as possible implications for the field.

Keywords: Diversity, Retention, Inclusion

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## **Introduction**

Universities are composed of several stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. DEI is a priority topic for many institutions to address and combat the evolving times around themes such as social justice, advocacy, and equality. Due to the institutional size, budget constraints, and unit capacity, the priorities are divided and ranked among several units to prioritize and fulfill institutional goals. Those goals are often strategic in nature, yet, disjoint in their planning and execution due to the focus variation.

Often times, the various populations deemed as underrepresented or underserved, are the foci areas. The institutional policies and barriers in place limit their access to resources and other opportunities that historically were beneficial for the white majority. Furthermore, upon examination of the multiple roles within an institution, other challenges arise. This article aims to share effective initiatives at a public, land-grant institution to serve as a transferrable model for other institutions. It explores efforts for faculty and staff, community members, undergraduates, and graduate students. In addition, other underrepresented and underserved populations are incorporated to improve overall institutional retention goals.

### **Why Does Diversity Retention Matter?**

As the United States population continues to shift to a majority-minority demographic many campuses are recognizing the importance of diversity retention. Although numerical representation is one way to demonstrate a commitment to diversity; it is not enough. A diverse college campus is beneficial to everyone (Piercy et.al, 2005). For example, Students who learn from and interact with those from diverse backgrounds build skills and competencies that are desirable to future employers and professional organizations and critical to the success of a global citizen. Similarly, Faculty and staff benefit by having space to develop and use non-traditional approaches for knowledge production in research and practice, making more positive contributions to society at large. In this article, we refer to those from traditionally underrepresented populations (in higher education) in the United States, including race, ethnicities, and gender along with familial educational background, veteran's status, and socioeconomic status. This is not exhaustive of the intersectionality of identities whether visible or invisible for faculty, staff, student, and community populations.

As the population of the United States continues to shift to a majority-minority demographic (more similar to the global majority), many campuses are exploring and engaging in recruitment practices that involve searching for those who bring diverse talent, perspectives, and backgrounds. However, once our colleges and universities hire and enroll diverse undergraduate & graduate students, faculty and staff, we have to ask the question "what happens next?" at these institutions that were not established with marginalized people in mind. As examples are shared of effective efforts, details are also given on the challenges faced in pursuing this important work along with transferrable lessons and strategies.

### **First Generation Student Support**

First-Generation Student Support is a centralized program and resource at Virginia Tech for students, faculty, and staff that promotes first-generation student success. Being the first in their family to go to college, first-generation students often struggle with the transition. First-generation students arrive to the university with a competitive academic profile but often

struggle with navigating the complexity of the higher education system. The terminology, policies, and processes can be daunting and First-Generation Student Support exists as a resource to help students be successful.

First-Generation Student Support is led by the Assistant Dean for First-Generation Student Support within the Dean of Students office in the Division of Student Affairs. The Assistant Dean also leads the GenerationOne Living Learning Community, which is an on-campus residential space specifically designed for first-generation students. The mission of First-Generation Student Support is to raise awareness about the needs and experiences of first-generation college students, connect first-generation students with one another and with faculty and staff to build community, and create an environment for first-generation students that welcomes diverse ideas and cultures, promotes lifelong learning, instills values, and cultivates a strong academic identity.

In the practical day to day, the Assistant Dean:

- 1) consults with faculty and staff on ways to support our first-generation population,
- 2) provides academic and professional development programming and support for the GenerationOne Living Learning Community,
- 3) hosts workshops and events that promote community building/sense of belonging and highlights key resources available on campus,
- 4) supports the personal and professional development of our peer mentors and student leaders,
- 5) and provides care, advocacy, and support to first-generation students that are referred to the Dean of Students' office.

At Virginia Tech, a student is identified as a first-generation college student if neither parent/guardian has earned a bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university



Figure 1: Demographic breakdown of the first-generation students enrolled at Virginia Tech between August 2022-January 2023.

The university's strategic plan included a goal to achieve 40% representation of underrepresented minority or underserved students (first-generation, Pell-eligible, and Veterans) in the entering class (freshmen and transfers) by 2022. When I started in this role, First-Generation Student Support was still a relatively new program. It launched in Fall 2019 and was immediately impacted by COVID-19. Ezarik (2022) reported that first-generation students made their college selection based on affordability and the existence of a first-generation program.

I launched a grassroots campaign on campus called #firstgenready. The goal of #firstgenready was to ensure the university was positioned to support current and incoming first-generation students appropriately. My goal was to make sure that everyone was clear on the definition of a first-generation college student at Virginia Tech, ensure that colleges understood and had access to tools to track their first-generation student population, assess how current first-generation students were experiencing Virginia Tech, make sure colleges, programs, and departments had the structure and resources in place to support first-generation student success, and build capacity for the growing number of students by increasing collaborations with colleges and departments campus-wide.

As educators, it is important to recognize the talents first-generation students bring to our campus and make sure that we have the tools and resources available when they need them. That can be providing clear guidance on how certain processes work, offering early insight to the materials and software they may need for their academic program, and removing structural barriers that unnecessarily hinder their success when they are working so hard to figure college out on their own. Retention efforts are successful when the commitment to serve students goes beyond student affairs and encompasses faculty and other staff (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2021).

As a result of the #firstgenready initiative, First-Generation Student Support has increased first-generation student engagement over the past year. There was no tracking tool used for attendance prior to August 2021 but First-Generation Student Support peer mentors reported little to no engagement prior to this time. The total attendance for all events during the 2021-2022 academic year was 165 students. As of December 15, 2022, the total number of attendees for all events in Fall 2022 semester was 627. Factors include an increased number of sponsored events offered by campus partners and increased interest of students.

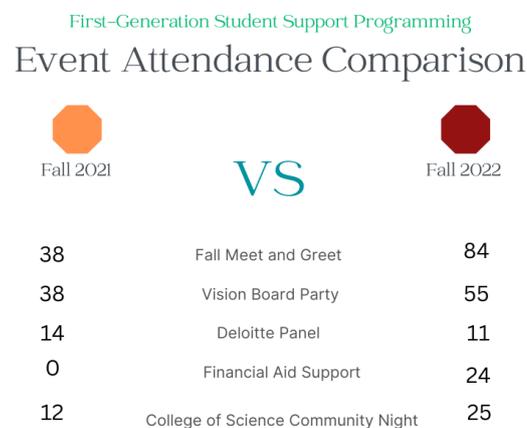


Figure 2: Events and attendance number comparison for Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 semesters.

Challenges with leading First-Generation Student Support is the lack of staffing support. The program sometimes has the support of a graduate assistant or part-time temporary staff but would benefit from having another full-time staff member to help support the case management load and programming needs. Limited staffing can limit the program’s capacity to offer effective programming and support.

Lessons learned after year one is to plan ahead and reach out to new students early. Sharing resources early and letting students know your program exists gives students something to get excited about and to look forward to. In July, campus partners joined First-Generation

Student Support in reaching out to all of its incoming students expected to arrive in August 2022. Students were advised on resources including our program and advised on getting final steps completed with orientation, advising, financial aid, housing, and dining. Providing a list of first-generation welcome events that would be happening when they arrived, likely contributed to the early and increased engagement this year.

## Diversity Retention in the College of Science

The College of Science is one of nine academic colleges at Virginia Tech, with 4,877 undergraduates. Within the College, we have an Assistant Dean of Inclusion and Diversity, who focuses on faculty and graduate students, and myself, the Director of Inclusion and Diversity, who focuses on undergraduate students. For our undergraduate student population, we are especially concerned about the retention of our underrepresented minority (Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native American) students and our underserved (low-income, veteran, and first generation) students. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of our undergraduate student population.

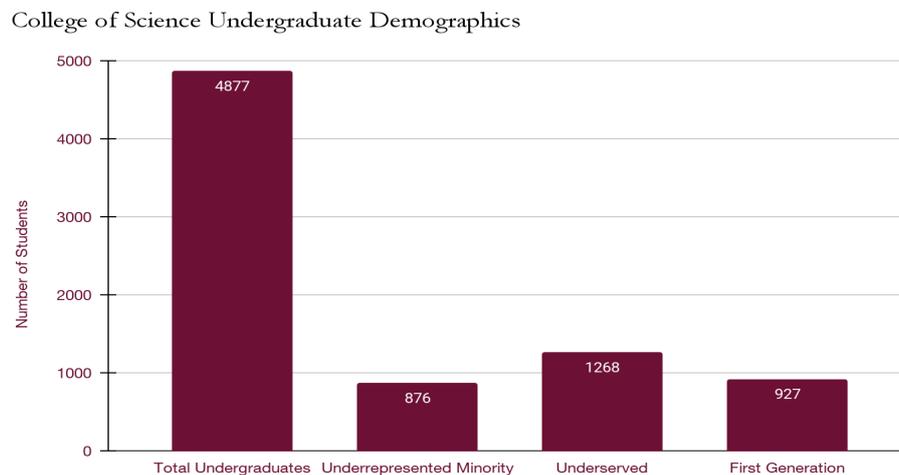


Figure 3: Demographic breakdown of undergraduate students within the College of Science at Virginia Tech.

We have four key goals for our Inclusion and Diversity team in the College of Science:

- 1) Develop the science identity of underrepresented minority and underserved students;
- 2) Build community for underrepresented minority and underserved students;
- 3) Educate all science students about inclusion and diversity, and opportunities available to them;
- 4) And create a line of communication between the Dean's office and undergraduate students.

To support the science identity development of students, we begin early with three key initiatives for students' first semester on campus.

Students can opt into the Diversifying Science Peer Mentoring Program, which places freshmen students in a "pod" of one upperclassmen mentor and two other freshmen students. They meet weekly to discuss belonging on campus, academic skills, and professional development. The program is open to all incoming underrepresented minority and underserved students with a focus on our first-generation college students. We also have the

First Scholars Success Program, which is a list of asynchronous and optional activities to boost academic performance for first generation college students. Those that complete ten beneficial academic activities earn a College of Science sweatshirt and a certificate of completion. Finally, I (Jess Hoopengardner) visit each one of our “First Year Experience” courses within the College. These courses are 1-credit seminars that students take with their fellow majors. The seminars discuss course selection, study skills, and resume building. I visit each course to do an activity on inclusion and belonging in the sciences to communicate the values of the College of Science to freshmen students.

The key challenge for our first semester student support is student engagement. With a large campus like Virginia Tech, how do we compete with all of the options available? To maximize student engagement, we employ three strategies: variety of modalities, being open to feedback, and going where the students are. Not all students are the same and therefore, not all students want to participate in the same ways. By offering support via small group mentoring, larger workshops, and asynchronous activities, students can choose a way that allows them to learn material in ways that benefit them. We also utilize student feedback to plan events, making sure we are offering what students need and when it’s convenient for them. For example, we figure out what courses are common among our majors and plan around common exam times. Finally, we go to where students already are. Most students are required to go to their First Year Experience seminars, so we are more likely to have an audience for those seminars. We also partner with Living Learning Communities to do workshops, visiting the place where students live. We will continue to refine our techniques in order to maximize student engagement for our initiatives.

### **Diversity and Inclusion within Graduate Education**

Virginia Tech has over 150 graduate programs and over 6000 graduate students. With this growing population and the need to incorporate inclusion and diversity not at a standalone but instead integral part of the graduate student experience, an Inclusion and Diversity (I/D) Requirement was created through a university policy (<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/programs/inclusion-diversity-req.html>). This policy was approved in April of 2018 and effective as of Fall 2019. Since it was decided to roll out the policy, graduate departments had until Spring 2022 to create and plan and have it approved by the Graduate School.

The I/D plan has four required topics: 1. The Virginia Tech Principles of Community as they apply to the valuing of human diversity and inclusion. 2. The impact that personal actions and words have on self, others, and the communities—university, national, and global—in which we live; issues of privilege, bias, power, prejudice, and discrimination; concepts of multiple personal, social, and cultural identities. 3. Available avenues of redress and our shared responsibilities as active by-standers. 4. The process of individual introspection required both to understand one’s own forms of implicit or unconscious bias and to create inclusive environments.

A few challenges related to the I/D requirement was the need to demystify the policy components and reassure departments of their ability to create an effective plan. Ways to counteract this challenge was getting student buy-in (acknowledge the requirements’ importance) and provide departmental consultations with decision makers. Another challenge is best framed as “What do I do?” When a policy is new, there is uncertainty. To address this challenge, it was important to strategize with others, remember the big picture. The last

challenge was the variability in submissions. Because the policy allowed flexibility in structure and composition, time was needed to learn about and share about resources.

There were several lessons learned through this novel effort. The first is the importance of finding allies and supporters. Those individuals were key to empowering other units to develop and implement a plan. The next lesson is to be prepared for public challenges. A clear and concise understanding of the policy is needed to help combat negativity, doubter, and others that hinder overall progress. Another lesson is to keep the larger goal in mind. The motivation for the policy is the lever to help one remain actively engaged. Since the plan was rolled out over several years, the momentum varied.

Since the creation of the first I/D requirement for graduate students, other graduate communities are exploring the design and implementation for their institution. Since Virginia Tech was a pioneer in this policy, it frequently discusses the structure and organization of the plan with other universities to ensure that they can overcome barriers and roadblocks to such an effort. To date, one other university has an active requirement and others are being considered. Thus far, feedback from students have been positive and we anticipate that the I/D requirement will be useful for their future professional endeavors.

### **Student Affairs Socially Just and Inclusive Assessment Practices**

In the division of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech, there is a robust assessment culture. These continuous improvement efforts are focused on serving students and employees. There is an office of Assessment and Professional Development (APD) dedicated to serving employees and their growth in assessment skills and as a professional. One of the aims of the office is to support Student Affairs employees to conduct socially just and inclusive practices in their assessment projects, including ways to support underrepresented minority employees. This office supports diverse employees through focus groups, wellness surveys, and having monthly professional development opportunities that include social justice, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) strategies into the assessment work being conducted.

The APD team offers professional development opportunities to the division to ensure assessment practices are incorporating DEIB strategies. There is content offered on focus groups, surveys, inclusive language, and reducing overextending of certain groups, like URM employees. When focus groups are conducted, reflexivity and bias-checking strategies are utilized (Creswell, 2009). These include facilitator reflections, bias-checking discussions among facilitators throughout data collection and analysis, and allowing participants to review reports and provide input before sharing (Creswell, 2009). When building surveys, we train users to incorporate inclusive language free from microaggressions that can occur in their survey items, like using terms of “Not listed, please specify”, with a text box instead of using “other” type of verbiage (APA, 2021). Another instance of providing equitable and inclusive practice for data collection occurs with the employee wellness surveys. The APD office coordinates to have surveys translated into needed languages of participants whenever possible (Li et al., 2001; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). In fall 2021, the office translated the employee wellness survey into four languages, in addition to English, so these participants had the option to respond in their preferred language. Lastly, assessment professionals are encouraged to look to existing data that might be available to answer their questions or data needs before potentially overextending their URM populations and seeking additional or repetitive feedback. While existing data alone may not give a complete picture to your URM experiences, assessment professionals should educate themselves on what data

exists and then look to data collection methods that would effectively expand and triangulate your data collection efforts (Creswell, 2009; Pope et al., 2004). These are a few strategies the division of student affairs utilizes in the assessment efforts centered around supporting URM employees in the division.

One example of supporting URM employees was an assessment focus group project conducted in Summer 2022. At that time, the facilitators of this project were provided a list of employees from which they could recruit underrepresented minority Administrative and Professional (AP) faculty members in Student Affairs. In this list, approximately 16% were URM and 84% were non-URM AP faculty, out of close to 200 people in the list. However, there were a few lessons learned based on some challenges that occurred during this project.

The first lesson learned is to clearly define your variables and population of interest (Pope et al., 2004). In the list that was received, the facilitators realized there were employee classification codes we needed defined. Additionally, the facilitators needed to define the scope of who would be classified as underrepresented minorities for the focus group (Pope et al., 2004). The facilitators discussed these definitions and were able to identify participants that were of racial and/or ethnic minorities and had the employee classification codes that encompassed AP faculty members in Student Affairs. However, these took more time than anticipated.

The second lesson learned is to account for the recruitment list to change while you are in your recruitment phase. As facilitators sent messages recruiting participants, the facilitators realized some of the target sample of URM AP faculty were leaving and some were being added to our list during the time of this focus group project. This posed a challenge for recruiting because we wanted to capture the insights of those that might be leaving, and new employees may give insight into their recruitment experiences as URM AP faculty. These challenges required the facilitators to keep in communication with each other and remain flexible to allow changes to occur in the recruitment phase.

A final lesson is to incorporate inclusive and bias-checking strategies through the process, including your reporting phase (Henning and Roberts, 2016). For example, the facilitators of the focus groups determined that because recording was not desired for this project, having two facilitators, one to engage participants and ask questions and one to take notes, would allow participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences as URM AP faculty. Then, after each session, the facilitators de-briefed and reflected together on the session, they also reviewed the detailed notes taken individually and made comments about disparities, and then would discuss any concerns or biases that could be influencing these analyses (Creswell, 2009; Henning and Roberts, 2016). After the findings were coded and the report was created, participants were asked to review the report before it was shared with senior leaders. This strategy allows participants to dispute or confirm the overall sentiments and themes found before the report was shared (Creswell, 2009; Henning and Roberts, 2016). While they were given time to respond, the facilitators would have liked to give them more time to reflect than the timeline allowed.

A mechanism to support your assessment professionals is through regular professional development opportunities offered to assessment colleagues (Henning and Roberts, 2016). One example is APD has hosted sessions to help employees create assessment reports that meet accessibility needs. Strategies like adding alt text to images, using color contrast checkers, and planning for accessibility strategies are taught in these sessions to equip users

to incorporate these strategies into their assessment projects and reports (W3c Web Accessibility Initiative, n.d.). Professional development opportunities that cover a range of support mechanisms to assessment professionals is a tangible way to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion into assessment work.

Overall, there are strategies that can be implemented when working with URM employees and supporting those in these populations through assessment efforts. The APD office has found that providing assessment professionals with professional development, resources, and support for including diversity practices, the more confident your employees can be in starting with a few strategies in their work. And as mentioned with the focus group example, taking time to plan and incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and accessibility strategies on the forefront allow for greater opportunities to have these practices woven into all phases of your assessment projects.

### **Retention Initiative for Diverse Faculty & Staff Through Community Engagement**

As the nation started to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 many employees across campus were starting to evaluate and reimagine the concept of the workplace. As this reimagining of a “new normal” continued there was a noticeable number of departures happening, and the staff of the Office for Inclusion and Diversity (OID) began to look at data related to employee attrition disaggregated by race and ethnicity. As a result of this research we learned that not only did White identified students greatly outnumber our students of color but White employees heavily outnumbered our collective number of employees of color (Asian and Pacific Islander, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American). When we looked at employee racial and ethnic demographics across all of our campuses the numbers were astounding. When only accounting for full-time teaching and administrative faculty as well as staff, the total number of White employees was over five times higher than the total number of all non-White employees. When we started to look at specific racial categories in addition to position description such as tenured versus non-tenured professors, or senior level administrators versus entry to mid-level administrators the racial disparities were even wider.

For geographical context, Virginia Tech’s main campus is located in Blacksburg, Virginia which is a small college town situated in the heart of Appalachia in the Southwestern region of Virginia. For the context of university size and scope, Virginia Tech offers more than 150 majors from nine academic colleges across five regional campuses throughout the Commonwealth. If you are a Virginia Tech employee who identifies as Native American or Indigenous, for example, you would be one of less than 55 employees who identify with that community. It would not be surprising or difficult to believe that if you were a Native faculty or staff member, that you might be the only Native person working in your department, the physical building, or even in your entire division. If your racial and ethnic identities were salient it could be challenging to know where to start finding and building community.

Piercy et al. (2005) posit that while it is important for colleges and universities to create strategic diversity plans that include the recruitment of diverse faculty it is “equally important [to] organize efforts to support and retain underrepresented faculty once they come to campus” (p.54). One way that Virginia Tech has created an intentional effort to retain diverse faculty and staff is through the creation of the Diverse Professionals Network. The Diverse Professionals Network (DPN) is a retention initiative that aims to connect underrepresented minority (URM) colleagues at Virginia Tech with each other as well as to those in the

surrounding New River Valley region. The DPN originally started in 2017 in the home of the Virginia Tech Chief Diversity Officer, Dr. Pratt, when she saw the need to provide a space for URM employees to meet and connect with each other. Once these biannual events outgrew her personal space she brought forth the idea to university leadership in an attempt to gain legitimacy and institutional support.

I was then recruited to join the Office for Inclusion and Diversity (OID) in 2019 to support our signature diversity programs and community engagement, including the expansion of the DPN. When I started, the DPN events occurred somewhat randomly without much variety and there was hardly any assessment data collected. Before I began to expand the offerings of the DPN I reviewed literature about diverse faculty retention (Olmedo, 1990; Piercy et al., 2005), challenges of minority faculty and staff working at predominantly White institutions (Thomas & Asunka, 1995; Whitfield-Harris, 2016), and even student engagement (Kuh, 2001; Astin, 1984) and belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Even though the latter scholars' research focuses on college student success I found there to be a lot of conceptual overlap in what we hoped to accomplish with faculty and staff. We wanted to help foster a sense of belonging amongst URM faculty and staff through high quality, community engagement programming. We believed that providing diverse colleagues with an opportunity to network and build community with their peers could help increase workplace satisfaction and enhance personal development and success.

Olmedo (1990) recommends that institutions demonstrate their commitment to faculty diversity through proactive programs and initiatives that support racial diversity such as the development of a supportive and collegial community. Since revamping the Diverse Professionals Network by prioritizing the interests and social engagement needs of URM faculty and staff we have seen the success of our efforts, even in spite of the global pandemic. In multiple surveys, focus groups, and other data collection initiatives, URM faculty and staff have cited the DPN as a major factor in their ability to make connections within the regional community, as well as an important factor in their overall sense of belonging at Virginia Tech.

As with any initiative there are always challenges and the development of the DPN is not exempt from this reality. Our biggest challenge in expanding the DPN is lack of capacity and human resources as well as a very limited budget. As the Director of Faculty Diversity and Community Engagement I work primarily as a unit of one and coordinating this network is only about 30% of my job. DPN event attendees often share great ideas on the post-event evaluation form for how they want to see this initiative grow but I can only dedicate a small number of hours each week to this initiative. On top of my limited capacity when I am operating as the sole coordinator, it can feel extremely overwhelming to try to address the vast needs of hundreds of underrepresented minority faculty and staff who are single, married, community leaders, parents, commuters with an array of personal and professional interests. Thankfully this challenge also doubles as one of the biggest lessons learned which is the importance of coalition building and stakeholder engagement. Now that people on campus and within the larger surrounding region know what the purpose of the Diverse Professionals Network is, it is easier to develop partnerships. Partnering with other colleges and universities in the region as well as community organizations to host networking events, meet-ups, and other activities has had positive outcomes including more events that offer more variety.

## **Conclusion**

The work that is happening with diversity retention at Virginia Tech should be seen as a model for how other Research 1, predominantly White institutions can begin to address the inevitable shifts in the demographic makeup of their student, faculty, and staff populations. While the efforts selected for this panel were intentional to showcase with the wider audience the variety of offerings, these examples are not exhaustive of the existing priorities of the panelists.

The panelists challenge others to evaluate the DEI efforts at their institutions and reflect on which areas need improvement. By also sharing lessons learned and challenges, we hope others can learn from them and avoid our mistakes. Use them as learning moments while remembering the power of DEI efforts. The efforts are transformative in the lives of so many and have longstanding influence for years to come.

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