

KENNEDY & COMPANY

Innovative Strategies for Higher Education

WHEN IT TAKES MORE THAN THE VILLAGE: ONE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S PARTNERSHIP JOURNEY TO BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE PLAN FOR DEI WORK

August 2023

OVERVIEW

While the ultimate goal of DEI work is to create an institutional culture and ethos that inherently understands that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is core to delivering on its mission, for most institutions, that goal is an aspiration that will require a lot of hard work to achieve.

Each institution has a different history and current context to contend with, so the roadmap of each institutional DEI journey will be slightly different. Sometimes this roadmap includes outside support.

Institutions may have multiple statements related to DEI, but they often have differing purposes. While codes of conduct and ethics and equal opportunity statements approach diversity from a legal perspective, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statements focus on the type of community the institution is.



- ❖ Tend to highlight zero tolerance for discrimination of those in protected classes (e.g. sex, race, religion, disability, etc.)
- ❖ Focused on behaviors that ensure a safe campus and community for students, faculty, and staff
- ❖ Often centered on ethical, professional, and legal standards, governing use of funds, technology, physical property, and IP
- ❖ Usually reviewed by legal teams prior to publication

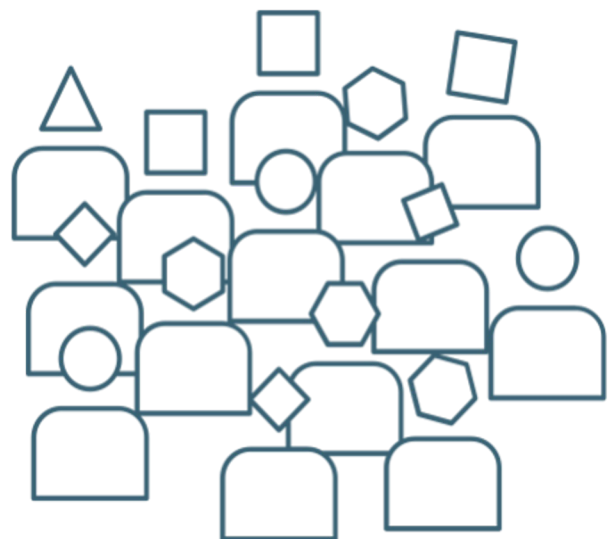


- ❖ Serves as a message and signal to those within and outside of the organization that the institution respects those of various identities
- ❖ A community-focused tone setting document
- ❖ Focused on an institution's plan and commitment to seek out, welcome, value, and equitably treat all individuals in its organization

DEFINING THE NEED FOR OUTSIDE SUPPORT

In an area with rapidly changing racial demographics and a broad age range of students with largely differing needs, Macomb Community College, in the suburbs of Detroit, looked to begin a DEI strategic planning process in the winter of 2021. With a history of grassroots DEI work, but perceived previous institutional inaction on DEI issues, a long-standing faculty with limited DEI training, and executive leadership looking for guidance in the space, the college sought out consultant partners to support them in this important work.

Macomb Community College sought a consultant to counsel and help the college community identify and address any systemic barriers that prevent an inclusive and equitable environment at the college. The project included the development of a vision statement that reflects Macomb's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts to support Strategic Plan 2025 and measurable action plans to foster a more inclusive, diverse, equitable, and accessible environment for the College's constituency. Macomb was seeking to actualize its institutional student experience statement, specifically unpacking, *"an inclusive environment that embraces diverse identities and perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging among all students and employees,"* to develop a vision and initial action plans for the College's DEI efforts. Macomb wanted a consultant to help operationalize these abstract concepts into concrete, measurable terms.



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DEFINING THE NEED FOR OUTSIDE SUPPORT

Executive Leadership felt strongly that potential partners needed to have experience with similar projects and to have that experience in the higher education sector. Ideally, the partner would have experience working with community colleges in the development of a DEI strategic plan. Most importantly, the potential partner needed to acknowledge, accept, and appreciate Macomb as an individual institution seeking a customized approach to the work. The college did not want a cookie cutter, prescriptive model layered over the institution. The college had a long history of many grassroots efforts supported broadly that needed to be acknowledged and recognized while also institutionalizing its efforts moving forward. Macomb needed expert guidance on celebrating the work that had been done with an acknowledgement of the work yet to come to institute systemic change for the college. Executive leadership recognized that level of expertise was not available internally, so a request for proposal was issued to seek external counsel on these matters.

Essentially, Macomb was seeking a partner in change management to undergo a systematic culture shift toward an inclusive environment that embraces diverse identities and perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging among all students and employees. Shifting long-standing organizational culture is not an easy task. Macomb found a partner with Kennedy & Company to engage in this important work.

START BY LISTENING & BUILDING A BROAD COALITION

Key to beginning any successful strategic planning engagement and particularly when looking to craft strategic direction for diversity, equity, and inclusion, is to ensure a broad coalition, representing key stakeholder groups from across the institution is brought to the table to help support the work.

Macomb tapped into an existing committee focused on institutional DEI efforts, the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) Council, with representatives from administration, faculty, staff, and students to serve as the steering committee to work in collaboration with Kennedy & Company.

Throughout the strategic planning process, the IDEA Council served as partners, a sounding board, and advocates for strategic planning efforts within the broader Macomb community. The buy-in and involvement of the IDEA Council throughout the strategic planning process was an essential part of change management and ensuring that the voices of those who would be most impacted by project efforts had a voice in the process.



Every community looks different, has unique needs, and its own story, so in order for any strategic plan to have lasting efforts, it has to be informed by an understanding of institutional context. This approach was a key reason why Macomb chose to partner with Kennedy & Company on this project. Kennedy & Company began their work by conducting a Current State Assessment. As a part of this exercise, the K&Co team spoke with members from across the Macomb Community College community in a series of interviews and focus groups to understand the history of DEI work at the college, perceived areas of strength in regards to DEI work at the College, pain points, and areas of opportunity. By beginning DEI strategic planning with a listening tour, Kennedy & Company was able to build trust with the community.

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START BY LISTENING & BUILDING A BROAD COALITION

As a third-party speaking with Macomb stakeholders without any bias or agenda, community members were encouraged to be honest and candid in their feedback on and hopes for Macomb's future-state. These conversations helped Kennedy & Company understand where needs aligned across student, faculty, and staff stakeholder groups and highlighted the areas that would need to be addressed and prioritized in any successful DEI strategic plan.

When asked to reflect on the Student Experience Statement, stakeholders commented on how the collaborative writing process allowed for the creation of a statement that is reflective of the welcoming community that many experience during their time at Macomb.



What I love most is when students come to me and want to talk. I appreciate the fact that students can come to me because I look like them...they look to me as someone who understands their perspective.



This is a big step forward—that the college is actively recognizing and seeking solutions to these issues.

I would not have stayed here so long if I didn't believe in this place.



There have been many good hands-on workshops that have woken many people to things that I was not aware of—I have enjoyed those and most people who have attended have enjoyed them.



CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

When DEI work is truly successful, it results in a tangible shift in institutional culture. While grassroots DEI efforts are often the catalyst for larger institutional efforts, in order for long-lasting cultural shifts to occur, there needs to be buy-in, support, and prioritization from institutional leadership. From the beginning of Macomb's engagement with Kennedy & Company, Macomb's senior leadership team, and particularly the College's president, was engaged in the strategic planning process. Core to this engagement was being receptive and open to receiving feedback from the campus community regarding perceived historical inaction on DEI-related issues. By understanding the community's areas of frustration, Macomb leadership was able to be pointed and intentional in how it communicated with the College about its commitment to long-term, impactful change.



Having the support of institutional leadership is crucial to cultural transformation, but it is also critical to garner board support as well. While boards are keenly focused on the long-range health and future of their institutions, they are far more removed from the day-to-day operations, tone, and feeling on an institution's campus. Because of this natural distance, it's crucial that those leading DEI strategic planning efforts make sure that the board understands the "why?" behind the work. Each board is different, having different levels of familiarity, comfort, and understanding with DEI work, so it's critical to meet them where they are.

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

HOW CAN LEADERSHIP CULTIVATE COMMUNITY TRUST?

In order for communities to lean into DEI efforts, they need to feel that their leadership sincerely supports those efforts. Here are ways that leadership can communicate to their communities that they are committed to DEI efforts:

- **Participate in DEI trainings and events:** *Being present matters. When leadership participate in DEI events, they are showing their community that they are willing to do the work and participate in the learning process.*
- **Communicate early and often:** *Clear and consistent communication from leadership keeps community members informed about successes, challenges, and progress towards goals. This also signals that DEI work remains top-of-mind.*
- **Fund the work:** *Budgets reflect priorities. Allocating funds to DEI efforts makes them sustainable over time and ensures the faculty and staff supporting the work have the resources they need to support students.*

Macomb leaned on its president to set the scene and offer the context for the institutional effort. Kennedy & Company then worked with the board in a series of sessions to help them understand national, regional, and institutional demographic shifts that necessitated intentional and strategic efforts for DEI work, highlighted efforts from regional peers, and shared insights from the current state analysis, placing a particular focus on the experiences and needs expressed by students. By offering context informed by leadership perspective, grounding efforts in historical data, and sharing insights gathered from their students, the board was able to lean in, asking critical questions, engaging in discussion, and ultimately becoming supporters of the determined strategic direction.



Ways for Leadership to Cultivate Community Trust

DEFINING STRATEGIC DIRECTION

After building a broad coalition, developing an understanding institutional context, and cultivating buy-in from institutional leadership, it's crucial to establish a clear vision of what the institution defines as and aspires to be as it relates to DEI. As highlighted in a recent Higher Learning Commission survey about how institutions define "equity" [Figure 1], these definitions will look different at every institution depending on the community in which the institution is located, its student population, or even historical and current events.

At Macomb, Kennedy & Company worked closely with the IDEA Council in a series of sessions to develop an institutional DEI statement articulating the Council's aspirational vision for DEI at Macomb. The statement embedded accountability language within it to highlight the College's long-term investment in DEI work. Following the Council's approval of the statement, Macomb's senior leadership team and board participated in a series of sessions with Kennedy & Company to fine-tune it. By engaging in a multi-step, guided development process of its DEI vision statement, Macomb was able to develop a collaborative and comprehensive DEI statement that would serve as the foundation and guiding light for all of its future DEI endeavors.

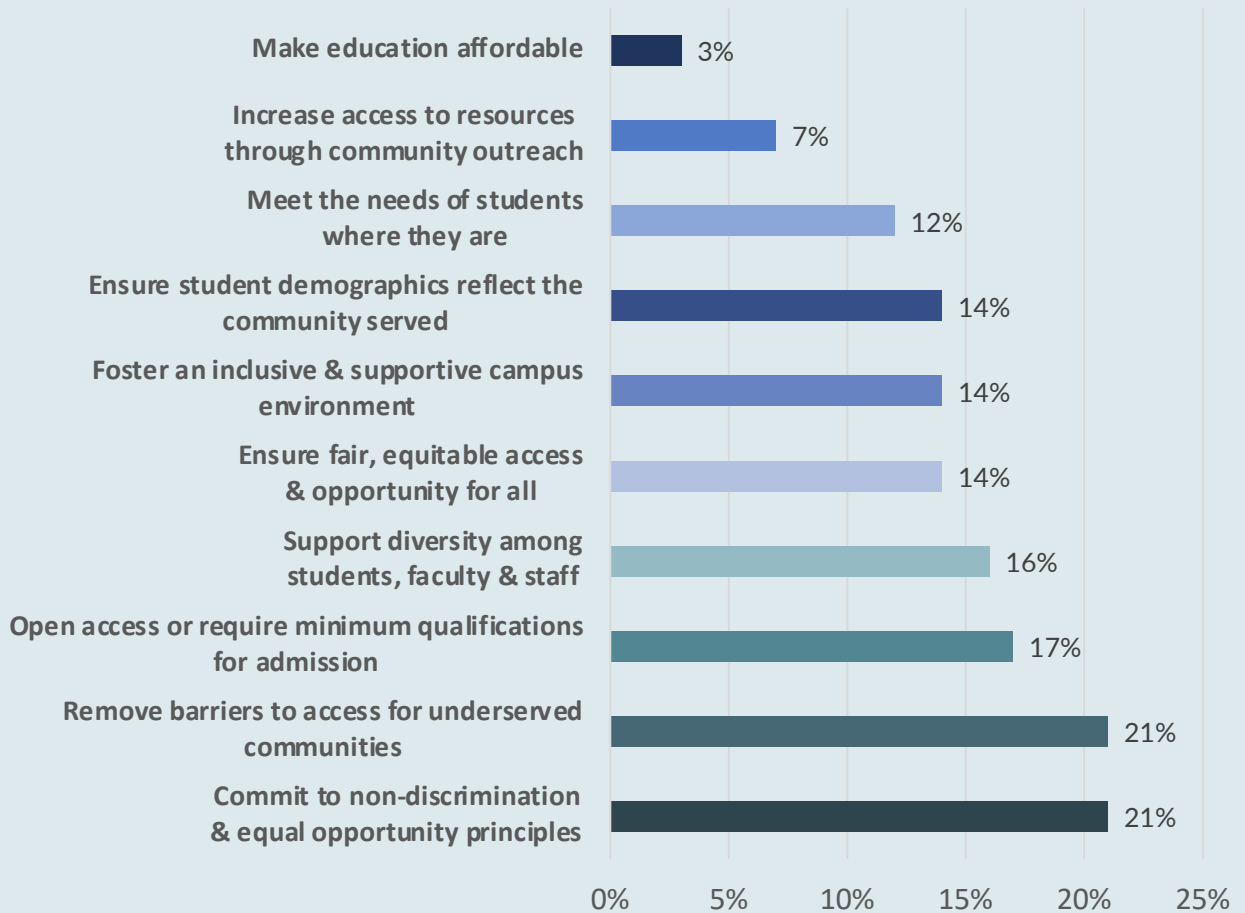
ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS KEY FOR ROADMAP DEVELOPMENT

To keep sessions forward-thinking and tactical, the IDEA Council used a variety of documents to direct their ideation process:

- 1. Institutional mission, values, and equal opportunity statements**
gave clear insight into who the institution had defined as its constituencies as well definition of the College's core values.
- 2. DEI statements from institutional peers**
offered examples of best practices from institutions with similar missions and constituencies as well as potential frameworks and structures that could be utilized at Macomb.
- 3. A current state assessment**
developed in the earliest phase of the work informed where the institution was currently as well where the community ultimately wanted the College to be.

SPOTLIGHT: DEFINING *EQUITY*

Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Emerging Themes: Equity Relative to Access



A 2021 report from the Higher Learning Commission asked 361 institutions to define “equity.” The broad range of themes that emerged from their replies indicates a multifaceted understand of equity among HLC institutions; 36% of responders had a definition for equity relative to access.

Source: Higher Learning Commission

DEFINING STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Once a clear institutional DEI vision is established, institutions should use that vision to drive the development of their more finite strategic goals or objectives. At Macomb, following the approval of the college's DEI statement, the IDEA Council, as well as other key community stakeholders, began the task of defining the written objectives of the DEI strategic plan pillar. In order for strategic goals or objectives to be as impactful as possible, it's important that they are written to be actionable and are accompanied by clearly enumerated key performance indicators and/or action plans.

Since the DEI strategic pillar was being developed to fit within the college's existing strategic plan, Macomb utilized its existing SMART (strategic, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) structure for its DEI objectives. During a community working session, stakeholders from across the college community utilized the insights from the Current State Assessment, the newly developed DEI statement, and Kennedy & Company's recommended areas of focus to develop an exhaustive list of potential objectives. Those objectives were then evaluated and consolidated by the IDEA Council and after working in small groups over the course of two months, they defined the language for the overarching DEI strategic plan strategy as well as four supporting objectives. Each objective was then supported by more granular action plans and outcomes to advance those objectives.



TRANSITIONING STRATEGY INTO ACTION

Often the criticism of strategic planning is that institutions develop a plan, but very little action results from that plan. From the beginning of Macomb's engagement with Kennedy & Company, the College emphasized its desire for a DEI strategic plan that equipped its community with clear actionable next steps. Beginning with the objectives developed by the Macomb working groups, the College identified leads and timelines for each objective and work group members for the cascading action plans. By identifying clear leadership for both the objectives and its supporting action plans, Macomb built in increased accountability to ensure the College had a defined roadmap to make progress towards its goals.

One of the first action items executive leadership focused on was the identification of an administrative lead to guide the work moving forward. Within four months of finalizing the strategic plan, Macomb hired an executive director of inclusion, diversity, equity and access (IDEA) to lead its efforts. This not only fulfilled part of the first objective focused on a structure to support DEI at Macomb, hiring a full-time executive level position fulfilled a long-standing desire from initial grassroots efforts that signaled the institution was all-in on DEI.

Often, the hardest part of DEI work is figuring out where to start. Institutional self-reflection and synthesizing the priorities and needs of stakeholder groups which often exist in silos can be difficult. It's in these scenarios when it can be valuable for institutions to bring in partners to offer unbiased insight and guide institutions through this important work. While diversity, equity and inclusion strategic planning can help an institution reflect on where it has been and put pen to paper to define where it ultimately wants to go, the key to successful work in this space is understanding that DEI work will remain continuous and ongoing. However, being committed to those ongoing efforts will ensure that institutions are able to best serve not only the students currently in their classrooms, but also the next generation of students.

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