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## How a college is using DEI data to drive change (opinion)

Authored by

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The brutal killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020 -- which, at the time, was only the most recent in a long line of murders of a Black person at the hands of law enforcement or vigilante violence -- was a call to action. The Black Lives Matter movement has propelled institutions of higher education to rethink much more intently diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, issues on their campuses.

The re-examination of DEI at many colleges and universities has included a particular focus on antiracism, or the actions that should be taken to ameliorate interpersonal, institutional and systemic racism and promote racial justice at all levels [1]. While we might like to assume that, as educators, we know better and therefore do better, that is a false assumption [2]. Achieving greater diversity, equity and inclusion specific to antiracism requires data: its collection, access, analysis and dissemination. If a college or university touts that we are “doing great in regards to diversity,” it needs to have data to support that assertion.

Therefore, an important step toward positive change requires determining what we should know about race on our campuses, what data currently exist to inform us and what data we need but don't yet have. In this article, we describe a process that we as faculty and staff took to understand the landscape of the data at our college in order to better inform and support decisions about DEI work among our faculty and in our programs.

### Data to Inform Antiracism Equity Work

In the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University [3] -- the largest and most diverse public university in Virginia -- faculty, staff and administrators came together to examine DEI concerns in an effort to develop university goals focused on antiracism. A number of task forces and committees

convened to examine structures and practices across the institution. As they commenced their work, questions arose regarding equity-related data.

Those questions ranged from foundational (e.g., What data matter? What data tell the story of DEI experiences in the college?) to instrumental (e.g., Who has access to such data? Where might they be housed?). Those questions pushed back against the notion that simple numerical parity data -- like the number of students, faculty and staff of color, gender or rank -- would be enough to tell us how the college “looked” in regard to our commitment to obtaining a diverse, inclusive and equitable campus environment. Experiences are the essence of understanding equity [4], and we had to move toward a better understanding of the actual experiences of colleagues and students of color in our college.

Yet as we began to seek data to examine those experiences in greater depth, it became clear that, as a college, we were limited in our ability to capture those data. In fact, we did not know whether much of the data even existed and/or how to access them -- let alone whether we were collecting the full spectrum of information we needed to know.

## Equity Data Audit Process

In September 2020, after a call from faculty members for collegewide data focused on equity to support antiracist and inclusive practices, our college’s dean convened an ad hoc task force to grapple with how to address the need for such. The task force included the five of us -- four faculty members, including two faculty of color, and one staff member. And it had three charges: 1) to identify the college’s data needs with regard to equity, 2) to locate potential sources for that data and 3) to make recommendations for ongoing processes to effectively collect and analyze the data. The committee developed the following guiding question to help us frame our work: How does [the college] represent its core value of social justice through antiracist and inclusive practices through an equity audit of collegewide data in all areas of work?

Ultimately, we provided faculty and staff members in our college with an overview of our process [5], the tools we developed and our recommendations for further action.

As members of the equity data task force, we met weekly during the fall 2020 semester. Our process included the following steps.

**Needs assessment.** We first identified the various stakeholder groups in the college at risk of being affected [6] by racist or inequitable policies and practices -- faculty, administrative staff, adjuncts and wage workers, and undergraduate and graduate

students, including graduate assistants. We also determined where in the life span of each stakeholder -- whether in hiring, promotion, recruitment or retention -- any inequity might emerge. We then developed the specific data points needed to best understand those stakeholders' experiences.

For example, for the faculty stakeholder group, we brainstormed data points within hiring, promotion, retention and compensation. Within hiring, the data points included things like "the number of faculty of color who serve as chairs of search committees," "placement of search ads from the last five years" and "number of college faculty trained in a five-year period about implicit bias in the search process."

This needs assessment included two broad stakeholder groups -- employees and students -- each with four areas of their lifespan represented. We brainstormed data points, as shown in Table 1.

**Data source tool.** Next, we created a data source tool as a way to operationalize the needs assessment and determine whether the data we identified were available -- and, if so, where they were housed, who had access to them and how often they were being updated. (See [here for an example.](#) [7]) We organized the data around their purpose as drawn from the needs assessment, as well as where an existing collection was located and how it should be used or analyzed. Finally, the tool sought to provide the data's general relevance for helping create antiracist and inclusive practices.

Table 1: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Data Points Identified across the Stakeholders' Lifespan at the Institution

Stakeholder Group		Number of Data Points Identified	Areas of Inequity across the Stakeholders' Lifespan at the Institution
Employees	Faculty	45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring</li> <li>• Promotion</li> <li>• Retention and experiences</li> <li>• Compensation</li> </ul>
	Administrative Staff	19	
	Adjuncts & Wage Workers	25	
	Graduate Assistant (GA) Work	9	
Students	Undergraduate	19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment/ Application</li> <li>• Retention</li> <li>• Completion</li> <li>• Satisfaction</li> </ul>
	Graduate (Masters & Doctoral)	47	
Other	Coursework	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course Evaluations</li> <li>• Student Performance</li> <li>• Curriculum</li> <li>• Student funding</li> </ul>
	Funding	5	

The tools we created illustrated our college's racial equity data in terms of three bins: 1) already being collected and organized but not yet analyzed, 2) collected but not yet organized or usable for analyses and 3) not yet collected.

### An Agenda for Action

We sought to provide people throughout the college with clear recommendations and next steps as it pertained to data. While data were readily available in certain areas,

such as student assessment and experience, other areas like faculty experiences had very limited data, hindering our ability to truly evaluate our college's culture of antiracist and inclusive practices. Thus, our recommendations for the future included: 1) transparency to our college community regarding these data equity efforts, 2) strategic planning for data collection and analyses processes, 3) college funding over the short and long term for the collection, collating and analyses of equity data, and 4) the alignment our college's equity data work with the broader university's efforts.

In 2015, the [Race Forward](#) [8] "Race Reporting Guide" of the Center for Racial Justice Innovation noted that antiracism is "the work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life." As we work to know better and do better in the face of structural racism, those of us in higher education must understand the landscape of equity data in our institutions. We must be willing to take antiracist action steps that move beyond focusing simply on obtaining numerical parity and work to truly understand the experiences of people of color.

Over all, we hope that the process we have used to devise a structure to identify the best data for understanding and evaluating our college's efforts toward diversity, equity and inclusion will inform other academics and their institutions -- and help them to devise their own processes tailored to their specific campus populations. It is not enough to say we are doing the work without rigorously looking at all the ways in which exclusion and discrimination occur in higher education. Having robust data is one way to ensure that we are moving beyond rhetoric into action.

### **Section:**

[Diversity](#) [9]

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### **Links**

[1] <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist>

[2] <https://diverseeducation.com/article/87365/>

[3] <https://www2.gmu.edu/news/452276>

[4] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09540253.2015.1103842>

[5] [https://cehd.gmu.edu/assets/docs/odi/ad-hoc\\_task\\_force\\_equity\\_data/ExecutiveSummary.pdf](https://cehd.gmu.edu/assets/docs/odi/ad-hoc_task_force_equity_data/ExecutiveSummary.pdf)

[6] [https://cehd.gmu.edu/assets/docs/odi/ad-hoc\\_task\\_force\\_equity\\_data/AppendixANeedsAssessment.pdf](https://cehd.gmu.edu/assets/docs/odi/ad-hoc_task_force_equity_data/AppendixANeedsAssessment.pdf)

[7] [https://cehd.gmu.edu/assets/docs/odi/ad-hoc\\_task\\_force\\_equity\\_data/AppendixBSourceToolFinal.pdf](https://cehd.gmu.edu/assets/docs/odi/ad-hoc_task_force_equity_data/AppendixBSourceToolFinal.pdf)

[8]

[https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/Race%20Reporting%20Guide%20by%20Race%20Forward\\_V1.1.pdf](https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/Race%20Reporting%20Guide%20by%20Race%20Forward_V1.1.pdf)

[9] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>