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Four ways to start the school year centering on DEI



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As we return to school filled with ideas, goals, and hopes for the new year, we must also be deeply cognizant of the complex changes that many educational institutions and learning communities have gone through these past years.

This complexity includes crisis and trauma but also a deeper sense of connectedness and innovation, manifesting differently in the lived experience of different groups on campus. Whether we are working to heal and reunite a community, decolonize our curricula, democratize decision-making, or unlearn our biases—we often know exactly what we want.

Still, we might feel overwhelmed and disheartened by the complexity of the problem or the inertia of the overall institutional structures and culture or simply not know where to start.

Campus-wide initiatives to deepen diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can empower our communities to address some of these challenges and practice our core values right from the start.

With new beginnings comes new energy. We invite you to use this new energy to reflect on the lessons of the past year and courageously reimagine what the future for your school could look like.

In writing this piece, we hope to share our own lessons learned and support our shared agenda for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion with concrete, practical recommendations.

We hope that it can help get you started on either a new initiative or support you in taking your DEI work to the next level.

1. The why, who and how of gathering more intentionally

As a new academic year begins, we enter what often feels like a marathon of gatherings: faculty and student orientations, team, committee, and working group meetings, welcome dinners, goal-setting sessions, and college assemblies.

We know from experience how easy it is to slip into last year's routines, especially when working on complex challenges and multiple construction sites. But these gatherings at the beginning of a new academic year or term set the tone for the next weeks and months.

Therefore, it matters which perspectives and experiences we include in a room, whether we have a clear purpose for a meeting, and how we design the gathering experience.

So, how will you get people to connect in meaningful, relevant, and accessible ways?

Why

The first question to ask yourself is *why* you gather.

Are you seeking to rebuild trust and confidence after several leadership transitions or a traumatizing incident? Is your goal to initiate a deeper culture shift around mental health and well-being? Or are you trying to support a diverse cohort of new students in forming a community? Identify the specific, *unique* purpose for *each* gathering you host.

Who

Who do you need to invite to achieve this purpose? For example, can you create, debate, or adopt a policy that impacts students or your support staff without their presence and input?

What kind of affinity groups can create safer spaces for particular salient identities? How might nurturing spaces like these interact with "coalition spaces" (Bernice Johnson Reagon) and do justice to the intersectionality of both discrimination *and* solidarity?

How

Next, reflect on *how* the gathering experience will help you achieve your purpose.

We feel most engaged in gatherings that challenge us to step beyond our comfort zone, help us better understand ourselves *and* those around us and invite us to co-create.

Can you imagine turning a central space in your building into a "past, present, future wall" that brings together challenges, learnings, and successes from the past year,

creates a shared pool of meaning in the present, and assembles your community's agenda for the next year?

Will you start your first school assembly with a wish gifting ritual and end it with a community dance?

As you design your gatherings, think about the rules that will support your purpose and how you will establish them.

If setting rules seems counterintuitive in the context of transformative gathering, remember how community agreements have helped you create an inclusive classroom climate or proactively address microaggressions.

Rules work because they document a community consensus and make explicit expectations and boundaries where implied etiquette or creative chaos might disempower new or less experienced community members to step forward and claim space.

Some questions to ponder: How will the group manage speaking time? Which rules ensure speaker privacy? How should disagreement and conflict be handled?

Take inspiration from your syllabi narratives and best mixtapes: Consider that it is as important how you open a gathering as how you decide to close it.

2. Set your goals, set your tone

You cannot go anywhere without a road map, so take the time to plan what you would like to do for the year. Be realistic, though, and start small. Perhaps find 2-3 goals and create timelines to accomplish these.

While addressing complex issues, we cannot let fear lead to inaction. Change must be done intentionally, and we must be mindful of the environment in which we are seeking change.

A more incremental approach may be in order on one campus whereas another may be more open to large sweeping change. Your goals should thus reflect the reality of your situation.

Begin by assembling a team and designating a point person who is responsible for driving this initiative. Perhaps this is an Anti-Discrimination Officer or a comparable role.

Regardless, it is good to form a small group of senior leaders and faculty who can begin to set DEI-informed goals for the year.

Involve students
early in the process

It will be important
to involve students
early in the process,
but if you do not
currently have any
DEI structure in
place, it may be
better to have some
initial goal-setting
discussions without
them.



This way, those in
teacher and mentor roles can invest in their own learning and unlearning and build
trusting relationships, which will allow them to give consistent guidance and co-create
an inclusive climate for those in their care.

Perhaps your goal is to write a policy. Another goal may be to create a designated DEI
role or committee. From here, other ideas like the creation of affinity groups or
designated DEI spaces to foster conversation might emerge.

Whatever your goals may be, use the beginning of the year to discuss them openly with
your entire community.

In addition to goal setting, as a senior leader, you should focus on tone-setting.

You can begin this by addressing the importance of DEI in your orientation and hosting
student brainstorming sessions in a community setting to introduce the concept of DEI
and demonstrate your commitment to this area.

Setting the tone is just as important as setting goals as it signals to others what to
expect for the year. This will be important as you begin to work on your goals as DEI is,
in reality, about changing culture.

3. Policy creation or review

Creating a bespoke DEI policy is an important early step as it creates awareness and a
shared pool of meaning. It also sets clear priorities, and thus community members have
a clear framework within which they can seek justice, give feedback, and hold one
another accountable.

If you already have a DEI policy, review it with your entire community to reflect if you actually practice the core values articulated in the policy text and if any changes need to be made.

At Mahindra United World College of India (MUWCI), We formalized existing, informal best practices into a policy that functions as a community agreement and holds all community members accountable. We brought together students and faculty to co-write parts of the policy (See this article: [DEI: Tools, strategies and approaches for school communities](#)).

A policy should not be a boilerplate document that is borrowed from other schools.

Instead, it should be written specifically for your institution, taking into account the different groups in your learning community. However, the policies other schools and learning communities have created can provide helpful starting points and inspiration. If you are interested in the MUWCI policy, we are happy to share it and grateful for your feedback.

A DEI policy should be accessible and understandable by everyone in your school. A glossary could be helpful for non-English speaking students and the prose should be as simple as possible. We relied on focus groups to help us ensure that the policy was easy to understand.

Keeping it as a living, breathing document is also essential as DEI is an evolving field of research and practice.

4. Convene labs to activate three essential DEI change-making ingredients!

Research on complexity and innovation suggests that when it comes to change-making, there are three key ingredients: diversity, trust, and a particular kind of experimentation.

Diverse teams are often the most innovative.

They can combine their perspectives to a 360-degree assessment, avoid various biases, think outside the cultural, generational, or disciplinary box, and bring a wealth of resources.

Think about what diversity means to you as you assemble your teams. Who is affected by the complex problem you are trying to tackle? Do you recruit from all stakeholder groups and across generations, disciplines, and power levels? How will you activate team diversity by building trust, psychological safety, and conflict resilience among its members?

For a diverse, trusting team, effective problem-solving often takes the form of a particular kind of strategic experimentation: “prototyping.”

When faced with a complex challenge, the team brainstorms multiple approaches and then tests them one by one, trial and error, to chart what works and does not work in practice.

Constructive failure

This has multiple advantages: We begin creating a culture of “constructive failure” that treats mistake-making as part of how we learn. It also shifts an institutional mindset that tends to focus too much time and resources on long planning processes toward continuous practice and concrete action.

As we strengthen our own change-making muscles at MUWCI, we are exploring lab formats to move more effectively from critical inquiry to action in the interrelated areas of professional development and DEI work.

Are curricular diversification and decolonization your priority?

Try convening a lab for syllabus innovation or an inclusive teaching and learning lab.

For example, you might invite a speaker on anti-racist teaching methodologies and then workshop with faculty and students on how you can adapt them for your syllabi, assessments, experiential learning activities, and student-led community engagements.

As you convene labs for specific challenges, think about who should be included, how often a lab should meet and how much time is needed to brainstorm, implement, and evaluate in shorter cycles.

Finally, it is important to consider how you can document your work for your professional portfolios, the collective reflection process of your learning community, and external assessments.

We hope that ...

... the four steps we've shared will help you center DEI as you embark on a new school year journey: Remember to set your goals and your tone and begin to examine how you intentionally gather as a community.

Writing a policy and co-creating DEI labs will help your community take concrete steps towards the goals you set for the year ahead. In fact, you might find that our four steps amplify one another's impact and, because they are really *practices* – not one-time events, will shift the culture beyond your school's orientation weeks.

In our own commitment to a "growth mindset," we invite your own best practices in the comments below or via email to us.

DEI is truly a collaborative effort, and it is through sharing our own experiences and entering often challenging conversations that we can come together and realize our potential as a community of educators and learners.

Join us for an I-DEA workshop

Save the date for our next Inclusion Via Diversity, Equity & Anti-racism Foundation Workshop (virtual) on 14–16 February 2023

We recognise that identifying where to start on your school's journey to inclusion via diversity, equity & anti-racism (I-DEA), and how to take action, can be challenging. This workshop is designed to support and guide you.

View our **events page** (<https://www.cois.org/about-cis/events>) for latest dates and information.

The sessions will be available on-demand in the weeks following so you can catch up or view again at your own convenience.

Related content:

- Read Reid Pierce's previous post for the CIS Perspectives blog **[DEI: Tools, strategies and approaches for school communities](https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/dei-tools-strategies-and-approaches-for-school-communities)** (<https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/dei-tools-strategies-and-approaches-for-school-communities>)
- Read **[many more perspectives and ideas](https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog?tag_id=299)** (https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog?tag_id=299) on DEI and inclusion via diversity, equity and anti-racism (I-DEA) on our blog, including:
 - **[Students lead the way to tackle discrimination](https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/students-lead-the-way-to-tackle-discrimination)** (<https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/students-lead-the-way-to-tackle-discrimination>)

- **What it means to be and do ‘good’** (<https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/what-it-means-to-be-and-do-good>)
- **From process to progress: Three big ideas for inclusion via diversity, equity & anti-racism (I-DEA)** (<https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/from-process-to-progress-three-big-ideas-for-inclusion-via-diversity-equity-anti-racism-i-dea>)
- **Breaking up with imposter syndrome: It’s not you, it’s not me, it’s the system** (<https://www.cois.org/about-cis/perspectives-blog/blog-post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/breaking-up-with-imposter-syndrome-its-not-me-its-the-system>)
- Our school members can find more resources to support their I-DEA work by logging into the **CIS Community portal > KnowledgeBase > Inclusion via diversity, equity, and anti-racism (I-DEA)** (<https://community.cois.org/schools/s/inclusion-via-diversity-equity-anti-racism>)

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