# Tools for Communicating About Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Leaders and communicators are increasingly expected by a broad variety of stakeholders to communicate around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues. For some, DEI communications is a new experience. The Office for Equity and Diversity (OED) and University Relations (UR) have developed the following guiding principles and framework to support this work.

In the wake of world and local events that disproportionately impact underrepresented communities, internal and external communications can provide clarity, support and a sense of safety and belonging. These events have also shown us that DEI work must be a part of everything we do—before a crisis.

## Defining diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)

There are a multitude of considerations that remain present and should be a critical aspect of DEI communications and decision making. You may already be familiar with **protected identities** [1] – but keep in mind that the **University of Minnesota employs an expanded definition of diversity** [2]. This definition recognizes the importance of ensuring that all members of our community have equitable access to the University and its resources. It is our responsibility as an institution—as part of our commitment to creating a welcoming and affirming climate—to serve and support the following individuals and groups at the University of Minnesota:

- American Indians and other indigenous populations

- People of color, including underrepresented groups and new immigrant populations

- People with both apparent and non-apparent disabilities

- People who identify as women

- People of various gender and sexual identities and expressions

- First-generation students

## Applying DEI to U of M communications

Often, leaders or communicators wish to create public statements, email messages, engage in strategic planning and other resources. Providing resources and support in timely ways demonstrates that you are considering the needs of your communities and working to provide meaningful leadership and transparent communication. However, it is important to navigate these situations carefully to avoid further harm to communities, communication that conflicts with University values or actions that fail to anticipate impacts to other parts of the University System.

OED and UR are available to provide consultation to build DEI communications capacity, serve University community members and coordinate, when possible, across the institution. This guide is meant to aid you in considering approaches that resonate with your communities and audiences.

**View the DEI Quick Reference (pdf)** [3]

# Developing a DEI communications strategy and plan

The steps below will help you develop or refine your campus, college or unit's approach to DEI communications strategy.

It is important to acknowledge that this work does not have one clear path or set of definitive rules. There are intersections and localized considerations that exist and they should be consulted through the communities involved. Here you will find ways to guide your DEI communications and leadership efforts, focused on localized action when necessary, support, resources and input loops–strategically thinking about DEI in all facets of the work–rather than singular statements or responses.

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## Step 1: Build capacity

This work should begin well before you need to respond to an issue or crisis. As a leader, it is important to proactively consider your–and your team's–existing work in DEI and ongoing collaboration with those who consistently do DEI work. The recommendations in this step will help you proactively incorporate DEI into your everyday work, and position you to be ready when you need to respond to an issue. Return to this step regularly to assess progress and outcomes.

- **Developing responsive, resilient and adaptive leadership**
  - Your place in DEI:
    - Given current staff and faculty capacity in your unit, how can DEI be prioritized?
    - How are the leaders within your department engaged in DEI efforts and education? Is more engagement needed, and if so, where?
    - How does the inclusion of DEI strategies and communications match with your current culture and goals?
    - How are the leaders and culture of your campus, college or unit perceived by various community members–internally and externally?
  - The emotional aspects of our work:

- How do your identities intersect with DEI and your work?
- What hurts or is uncomfortable/unpleasant?
- What are you afraid of?
- What is the worst that could happen?
  - The power of thinking through worst-case scenarios can better prepare you and your department.
- Identifying opportunities for growth:
  - What else do you want/need to know to engage in DEI work?
  - What types of support do you need to be successful?

- **Consultative process to build trust and sincere DEI engagement:**
  - Are DEI representatives consulted on ongoing initiatives?
  - Is there a DEI committee or group in the department, unit or college? If so, is it consulted on initiatives?
  - What input mechanisms are in place to receive feedback and invite conversations?
  - What groups may need additional outreach to build trust?

- **Consider lessons learned and the need for continued work**
  - Where did we need the most help?
  - What worked well?
  - What didn't work well?
  - Which areas were the hardest?
    - Development, consultation and emotional aspects are described below
  - DEI work and building trust with students, faculty, staff and external stakeholders is hard work and can be more successful if it is consistent and sustained. What do you need to do to advance this work and communicate it day to day?

## Step 2: Develop a process

Knowing how you will approach an initiative or response communication in advance will help you and your stakeholders stay focused when the need arises.

- Develop measurable goals and objectives
- Determine what perspectives should be involved to further develop your strategy
    - Focus on roles and responsibilities; not people. This will prepare you for any situation in which an urgent or timely approach is necessary.
    - Outline how often you will check-in to ensure progress
- Determine when you will connect with institutional support such as your college communicator, college leadership, Office for Equity and Diversity, University Relations or others in the administration
- Determine what questions you will ask your leaders or communities to clarify your DEI effort
- Develop clear expectations for what and how often you will communicate
- Consider how you will receive and respond to feedback
- Have a review and consultation plan for ongoing communications and DEI strategies and return to the questions in "Step 1" after the DEI effort. Consider what success will look like.

## Step 3: Choose the appropriate communication format

If a response is necessary, OED and UR can share insight on how best to share the communications, as well as help you work through a strategic process. They can help you consider how a response will affect your campus, college or unit, help determine whether a response is necessary and who else at the University has spoken about the issue already or is planning to address it in the future. All of these factors will influence your choice of format.

# Statements

Statements can be appropriate when you need to communicate your organization's broad commitment to DEI work or in response to an event. It could be more beneficial to amplify other statements or voices instead of writing your own. As a leader, begin by considering your role in the issue at hand. If it is a topic or issue that directly affects your areas of oversight or expertise, consider connecting with University leaders on a unified approach to the topic, offering assistance as needed. If the statement is to be issued by your office, consider these questions.

- Should we make a statement? Why or why not? (Remember that no response can also be viewed as a response.)

- Who is impacted by the issue? Have they been consulted? How do they feel about the potential of you making a statement?

- Does this issue affect the University more broadly? If so, have appropriate representatives been consulted?

- What are others at the University doing? Have others who may be closer to the issue, or more senior at the University (e.g. the Chancellor, Provost or President) issued a statement and can we amplify their voice instead?

- What are the goals of the communication?

- Who are the audiences?

- Have we made statements in the past? What did they say?

- Will we continue to make statements for similar situations in the future?

- What should the statement say and why?

  - Framing

  - Tied to action

  - Language

- How will the communication be shared (e.g., in person or during a live conversation, in writing, posted online or distributed via email or other means)?

  - What access considerations should be made?

- Does the statement align with other communications?

- If there is pushback, how will we respond?

## Social media

Social media is often the first interaction you will have with the public and internal stakeholders. Before you communicate proactively on social media, or respond to social media directed at your organization, consider the following questions.

- What is being said?
    - Who is saying it?
    - Is it a University community member or not?
    - Does the individual have a capacity to elevate the issue (e.g., large number of followers, policymaker or other prominent individual)?
    - How many are engaging in the conversation?
    - Have concerns or questions been directed at a specific part of the University or an individual, or are comments general in nature?
- In what ways is this different from other critiques?
- What do you want to say in response? Why?
- What are the goals of responding?
- What are the risks/benefits of responding?
- Are there Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) or other privacy regulations that should be considered?
- Who needs to be consulted?
- Is now the right time to respond? In many cases, monitoring and waiting can cause social media users to move on. Be aware of growing engagement or high-profile engagement.
- What is the best way to respond (i.e., direct/private response vs. public post)?
- How would a social media post align with your broader communications strategy? Is the post consistent with the tone and actions through which your unit consistently communicates?

# Responses to stakeholder resolutions or calls to action

Stakeholders will sometimes request or demand action from you/the University. When you receive one of these requests, it is important to respond thoughtfully and in a reasonable amount of time. You may feel pressure to respond immediately, but these questions can help you pause and consider the best course of action.

- **Consider what you think**
  - Take a deep breath and pay attention to your reactions. Receiving critiques can be difficult.
  - What do you think of the requests or demands? Are they reasonable/possible?
  - What action, if anything, has already been considered?
  - Are any of the demands surprising?
  - Who is making the demands and how and in what ways are you connected to those making demands?

- **Get clear on what's happening**
  - Who else at the University received the request or call to action? Determine who is best situated or equipped to respond. (i.e., is it a local issue or an institutional one that requires involvement at a higher level of leadership?)
  - If you are the best situated to engage with those involved, consider having a conversation with the individual or group. Who else at the University holds trusted relationships, and can they be helpful to you with this outreach?
  - How are terms being defined and used?
  - What type of change is wanted/expected?
  - What would success look like?
  - Consider climate/culture issues
  - Who else should be consulted? Are referrals necessary?

- **Decide how to respond**
    - What do you want to say and why?
    - Is it better in writing or in person?
    - Are there existing formats or opportunities that you can use for communication or is a new approach needed?
    - Aim to communicate clearly and transparently
    - Set boundaries and manage expectations
    - What will you commit to doing?
    - What is already occurring locally or across the institution that addresses stakeholder concerns? How can sharing/reiterating information about those efforts be helpful to your response?
    - Consult with those who will be involved
    - Provide support for those who will be involved

- **Evaluate and develop lessons learned**
    - Have candid discussions about shifting expectations about the issue at hand and how it will affect your work
    - Have candid discussions about what's working well and where more capacity-building is needed
    - What do you need and why?
    - What do your colleagues need and why?

## Step 4: Develop your message

These guidelines can help you frame messages that center the communities you are supporting and show care and sensitivity.

- **Avoid stereotypes by checking your bias** [4].
- Place the needs of the group you are writing about at the center. Their needs should be the focus, rather than the author's voice.

- Ensure that headlines, images, captions, and graphics are fair, responsible and accurate/show reality in their depiction of people of color, or other marginalized identities and issues.

- Understand the many ways each group may be affected by the message such as race, gender, and class, and consider all communities of color.

- Focus on the needs of the affected community by decentering the whiteness perspective and privilege.

- Consult with a DEI committee or consultant and/or varied perspectives for input on the message.

- Only use personal identifiers (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.) when it is pertinent to a situation and use it fairly, identifying white individuals if people of other races/ethnicities are identified. (Ask the individuals you are communicating with how they would like to be represented.)

- Include opportunities for your audience to find more information and/or support if available. Provide specific opportunities for stakeholders to take action when possible.

- Include opportunities for input (i.e. forms, contact information) and indicate how you will respond to feedback, if appropriate.

## Step 5: Evaluate outcomes and determine next steps

Evaluating steps that were taken, along with measurements along the way, is helpful in creating lasting DEI communications that build trust and engagement with all communities within the college, unit or department. Once you have considered the following, return to Step 1 of this framework to refine and re-engage with your audiences.

- Were the actions taken sufficient and timely?

- How did those actions likely change the outcome (i.e. lowering the intensity of the situation; or shortening the length of potential attention/stress)?

- What more can you do to lower the temperature?

- What was the emotional or reputational toll of the effort (i.e. personal,

college/unit/University)?

- What feedback has been received and what steps will be taken to address it?

- What ongoing repair and outreach work is needed?

- **Evaluate and develop lessons learned**
    - Have candid discussions about shifting expectations and how it will impact work

    - Offer supportive resources

    - Be honest about about what's working well and where more capacity-building is needed

    - What do you need and why?

    - What do your colleagues need and why?

## Resources

- **Office for Equity and Diversity Education Program and Resources** [5] [6]

- **Office for Equity and Diversity Certificate Program** [6]

- [6]**Digital Accessibility Badging Program** [7]

- [7]**Accessibility of Information Technology Policy** [8]

- **Quick Tip from the University of Minnesota Center for Writing on Nonbinary Gender Pronouns** [9] [10]

- **University Libraries Anti-Racism Reading Lists** [10] [11]

- **Faculty Fighting Racism from the Graduate School Diversity Consultation Team** [11] [12]

- **Accessible U** [13]

- **Diversity Community of Practice** [12] [14]

- **Communicators Forum** [14] [4]

- **The Diversity Style Guide** [4] [15]

- **GLAAD Media Reference Guide** [15] [16]

- **ADA Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities** [16] [17]

- **SPRC Style Guide: Reporting on Mental Health** [17] [18]

- **AP Race-Related Coverage** [18] [19]

- **CSU Diversity Style Guide** [19]

- **PR Daily - 5 Tips for Identifying and Avoiding Bias During a Crisis** [19]

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**Links**

[1] https://eoaa.umn.edu/resources

[2] https://diversity.umn.edu/mission-vision-values

[3] https://z.umn.edu/DEI_Quick_Reference

[4] https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/resources/

[5] https://diversity.umn.edu/education/education-program-resources

[6] https://diversity.umn.edu/certificate

[7] https://it.umn.edu/services-technologies/digital-accessibility-badging-program

[8] https://policy.umn.edu/it/webaccess

[9] https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kJ9uURPh4PkvCnsiPOnYDpHdYlQd3Wh1/view

[10] https://libguides.umn.edu/antiracismreadinglists

[11] https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/diversityconsult/home?authuser=0

[12] http://dcop.umn.edu/

[13] https://accessibility.umn.edu/

[14] https://umcf.umn.edu/

[15] https://www.glaad.org/reference/lgbtq

[16] https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing

[17] https://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/mental-health-reporting-style-guide.pdf

[18] https://www.apstylebook.com/race-related-coverage

[19] https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/csu-branding-standards/editorial-style-guide/Pages/diversity-style-guide.aspx