

Equity and Inclusion Policy

Purpose of the Policy

WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) member institutions are expected (Standard 1) to have a clear and explicit sense of their essential values and character, their distinctive elements, and their place in both the higher education community and society, and their contribution to the public good. This includes demonstrating an appropriate response to the increasing diversity in society through its programs and practices. Through their commitment to student learning and success and to quality and improvement, institutions are expected (Standard 4) to engage in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory self-reflection about how effectively they accomplish their purposes and achieve their educational objectives.

Since its 1994 Statement on Diversity was incorporated into the 2001 Handbook of Accreditation, the Commission has had more than a decade in which to observe the responses to these expectations by member institutions, which have a remarkable diversity of institutional types, missions, and student profiles. That experience has confirmed that issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are systemic, related to student success and institutional effectiveness in a number of ways.

The goal of this document is two-fold: to update the diversity policy to clarify Commission expectations for institutional reviews and to share principles and good practices that have been observed in member institutions that have successfully advanced their inquiry in these areas.

Introduction and General Principles

As institutions of higher education, the purpose of colleges and universities is to deliver an essential public good, namely a high-quality post-secondary education. Institutional commitments to advancing educational excellence and fostering an engaged, civil society are demonstrated in part by policies and practices that help ensure the success of diverse student populations and prepare all students to learn and derive value from the broad representation of colleges and universities that are members of WSCUC.

WSCUC member institutions have valuable assets, including rich programs that are reflective of the goals of the diverse student populations that they serve, that stem from a belief that educated people are engaged “citizens of the world” as well as a commitment to scholarship as a form of expression and expansion of knowledge. Students benefit most from these assets where there is a climate of respect for a diversity of backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives, and where the institution’s various constituencies deal honestly and constructively with issues of equity and inclusion. All institutions face a fundamental challenge to create a campus culture where the wisdom and will to build trust among people and groups is widely distributed, and opportunities for enhancing equity, inclusion and community are encouraged and supported. At the same time, there is no expectation that, with the variety of institutions in our region, there will be a uniform approach or response to this challenge. The common goal among member institutions is to realize the potential of their students through higher education.

Given the importance of institutions valuing diversity and fostering inclusion to serve all of their students and the public, thereby truly contributing to the public good, the Commission notes the following principles that underlay its standards and expectations for institutional reviews.

- Commitment to student learning and success requires that institutions actively seek to support the success of all of their students.
- Engagement with historical and contemporary issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are educational objectives that can be productively incorporated into programs at any level.
- Seeking and valuing multiple dimensions of diversity within its various constituencies strengthens an institution's effectiveness.

Expectations for Institutional Review and Presentation

To fully respond to the expectations of the Standards, an institution should be prepared to provide evidence of inquiry and action to address the following questions, especially in the context of seeking initial accreditation or responding to previous Commission recommendations concerning diversity.

Institutional Commitment

- How does the institution define diversity within its mission and purposes with reference to existing students, staff and faculty? What communities does the institution seek to serve? How may changing social demographics affect the way the institution serves its students and the public good?
- How have institutional leaders, particularly governing boards and senior administrators, demonstrated the willingness and capacity to identify and address equity concerns among campus constituents and to help educate the broader community regarding the need for equity and inclusion at their institutions?

Access/Inclusion

- Has the institution identified groups of prospective students who may have been historically underserved by the institution? Has it taken steps and devoted resources to increase access and success for these students?
- How do the institution's decision-making structures and planning processes integrate the perspectives of members from its multiple constituencies, including those who may have been historically underserved?

Support/Success

- How has the institution tracked and analyzed the educational achievement of distinct groups of students and acted to close gaps between groups over time?
- How does the institution identify needs or concerns of distinct groups among its constituencies and provide support consistent with the needs expressed by those groups?

Campus Climate

- Does the institution regularly assess perceptions of campus climate by students, staff and faculty? How are the results shared with the campus community and how do they inform institutional action?
- Does the institution have effective mechanisms for addressing bias-related concerns from members of its community?

Educational Objectives

- Do any curricular or co-curricular programs incorporate student learning outcomes specifically related to the ability to acknowledge and interact productively and respectfully with people of diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives?

Good Practices for Valuing Diversity and Fostering Inclusion

Drawing upon the success of its member institutions in engaging with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Commission shares the following good practices that can be adapted to a diverse spectrum of institutional missions and contexts.

1. Institutional mission and purpose are reexamined. Governing boards have an especially important role in this regard. As students, faculty and staff within institutions become more diverse, there is an even greater need to focus on common purposes and to identify core values. Reflection on institutional purpose, which should be at the heart of every self-study, also implies a sober assessment of changing and sometimes conflicting goals.
2. Institutions seek and nurture diversity within their student bodies, faculty, administrative staff, and governing boards. In many cases, colleges and universities choose, at their own initiative, to compare their composition to regional, state or national populations as a whole. In other instances, the reference group is the particular constituency, sometimes religious in nature, which the institution intends to serve. In applying its Standards, the Commission respects the institution's own view of its constituency, based upon its unique mission. Each institution, however, analyzes the diversity present in the constituency it chooses to serve, honestly represent that aspect of its mission to prospective students, actively seek to reflect that diversity in its membership, and consider the role of diversity in addressing student needs.
3. Institutions include an appreciation of diversity as an outcome of instruction appropriate to students' level and goals and consider all forms of diversity as they intentionally and unintentionally affect the educational process. WSCUC member colleges and universities are diverse in many ways (e.g., the various academic disciplines and fields of professional study as well as the diversity of the community in terms of age, ethnicity, political belief, socioeconomic class, religious faith, gender and sexual orientation, interest in the arts and athletics, regional and national background). Each institution considers how the various forms of diversity can be understood, respected, and valued in the curriculum. Faculty of each institution have primary responsibility to rise to this challenge as they plan curricula, design courses, and teach and advise students.

4. All students enrolled at the institution have their learning and success supported by environments that foster their intellectual and personal development. In particular, institutions seek to achieve a better understanding of the characteristics, interests, aspirations and learning needs of the diverse segments of their student populations. As institutions address challenges faced by students from historically underserved populations, particularly in terms of student learning, support from faculty, the availability of academic support services and the quality of residential life, they consider responses and solutions that benefit all students and are informed by communication and collaboration across units.

 5. *Institutions assess their efforts to make equity and inclusion integral to plans for institutional improvement.* Assessment includes well-articulated metrics that measure progress over time, an examination of disaggregated retention and graduation statistics, and the gathering and analysis of comparable data and trends in individual schools and departments as well as for the campus as a whole. Of equal importance is probing beneath the numbers to illuminate individual perceptions and patterns of interaction among the members of various groups. Institutions conduct periodic systematic assessments of how different students, faculty and staff view their experiences on campus (often referred to as studies of campus climate).
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Approved by the Commission, 1994
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