

**Feedback on A Framework to Foster Diversity at Penn State: 2010–15 and
2014–15 through 2018–19 Diversity Initiatives**
Fall 2014

Office of the Vice President for Strategic Communications

The role of the Office of the Vice President for Strategic Communications, as specified in its 2014–19 Strategic Plan, includes building Penn State’s image, promoting Penn State’s competitiveness, and managing the serious legal and media challenges facing the University. Strategic Communications has done a commendable job of incorporating diversity and inclusion into recent recruitment-driven Web changes, but as the University’s flagship public communications entity, the Unit has yet to fully realize its potential as a force in leveraging methodical, metric-driven planning: (1) in making rich institutional data available and (2) for diversity and inclusiveness in news, branding, and recruitment.

The Unit oversees five major functional divisions whose purpose is to “foster and portray a culture of inclusion and diversity” by representing diversity as a feature of many of the themes and activities framed in Penn State’s strategic communications. Diversity Planning is the only one of the six divisions that does not have a position on the organization chart; instead, it is structured to be “inherent” to all of the other divisions and “is the focus of the standing climate and diversity committee.” However, explicit diversity interests do not appear in the other five functional divisions’ missions, goals, objectives, or priorities, which is a significant oversight.

Although plans for initiatives are strong, many of the goals, objectives, and activities appear similar to those in the 2010–15 plan, and the pattern of accomplishments provided in the previous plan is difficult to discern. Few metrics are reported that can be used to assess progress from plan to plan. The Evaluation Report, “Brand Awareness Baseline,” does not take advantage of the opportunity to gauge public perception of the University’s diversity goals and accomplishments. Although the Unit may intend for diversity and inclusion to cut across all functional divisions, using explicit language to communicate this intent would demonstrate a conscious effort at improvement. It will be incumbent upon the new leadership to transform these plans into measurable, reportable actions and outcomes in future iterations of planning.

RESPONSE: We welcome the review and agree with the recommendations received by the Office of Strategic Communications. We are currently completing an updated strategic action plan led by the Department’s new leadership, and will be integrating and building upon the unit’s work to date in this area, and the input we have received. We are working toward a model program that reflects the University’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, in our hiring practices and in the ways in which we promote Penn State to the world.

Campus Climate and Intergroup Relations

Challenge 1: Developing a Shared and Inclusive Understanding of Diversity

- The “Lunch and Learn” series created to focus on diversity issues is well attended locally. However, it is not clear how these events will be leveraged beyond an office-level impact. Evaluation and assessment will enhance the future success of this program.
- A diversity events calendar, “Diversity Matters” blog, and listserv devoted to diversity are all positive initiatives. Collaborating with other University diversity liaisons to promote the “Diversity Matters” blog may make this project a more effective tool in reaching a broader audience.
- Updates to the University’s official Editorial Style Manual to encompass Penn State’s Nondiscrimination Statement related to gender, perceived gender and gender identity provide additional opportunities for expansion of the diversity section.

Challenge 2: Creating a Welcoming Campus Climate

- In seeking data on a campus climate measure, an opportunity exists to partner with other units, such as Student Affairs or Educational Equity, to acquire data, help design data tools, or use tools that already exist.

- Although the Unit's plans to promote greater engagement of staff in diversity activities are constructive, involvement with the President's Equity Commissions has resulted in a small number of participants. Perhaps a job-based affiliation(s) with the Commissions surrounding specific office duties would provide a deeper understanding of issues and a more fruitful news-inspiring relationship.
- Hiring a Web analyst to monitor the penetration of the University's online messages among targeted groups is positive. The emergence of information unique to diverse groups will be important to review.
- Monitoring social media has yielded intelligence about issues that can affect the climate of the University's diversity efforts. Consistent review of trending reports would be useful in the assessment of future diversity endeavors.

Representation (Access and Success)

Challenge 3: Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Student Body

- For Unit efforts to broaden the representation of diversity in the photo/image library and to improve search functions for tagging purposes, consider cultivating partnerships for definitions and categorization.
- Ensuring diverse representation in recruiting and marketing efforts is noteworthy. However, specific actionable goals, timelines, and assessment to evaluate this initiative are lacking.

Challenge 4: Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Workforce

- Although the Unit has a relatively small staff, plans to diversify new hires using a variety of tactics are impressive. The optimal use of data in examining the representation of specific groups will be essential to establishing baselines and measuring progress as new vacancies become available.
- Creating a Unit-wide diversity training program "imperative" is commendable, but without specific goals and timely assessment, the exact benefits of this training will be vague.

Education and Scholarship

Challenge 5: Developing a Curriculum That Fosters U.S. and International Cultural Competencies

- While Strategic Communications is not an academic unit, many opportunities exist to support current and future cultural competencies in the academic setting. Plans to increase communication to improve understanding of student domestic and international diversity issues across the University is one such endeavor.
- Involvement in the University's General Education Task Force and Engaged Scholarship activities provides an opportunity for enriching the Unit's environment and culture.

Institutional Viability and Vitality

Challenge 6: Diversifying University Leadership and Management

- The plan supports diversity-oriented professional development and training opportunities. Data documenting involvement in such activities would illuminate the commitment to this initiative.

Challenge 7: Coordinating Organizational Change to Support Our Diversity Goals

- The recent hiring of the Vice-President for Strategic Communications provides both an imperative and an opportunity to continue and strengthen the Unit's diversity efforts.
- The standing diversity committee represents a major effort to coordinate changes that support Unit diversity goals. Integrating the vocabulary of diversity and inclusiveness into the mission and goal statements will help elevate the Unit's awareness of its need to attain a high degree of diversity competency.