

University of Iowa's new Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan aims to promote and support a diverse campus community

IOWA CITY, Iowa- The 2019-2021 Excellence through Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan was released on April 4, 2019 and lays out plans to address issues the university faces with creating a safe, inclusive environment for minorities and traditionally marginalized groups of students and faculty.

While this plan has been in the works for around two years, it came at a crucial time for the University. Students in minority groups started the #DoesUIowaLoveMe digital campaign in February to open up discussions on how faculty and administrators have not been adequately providing for their needs.

Students took to Twitter and Facebook to share their personal stories about how the university failed them. Most students used the online space solely to express their concerns.

One student wrote on Twitter after seeing a demonstration by a conservative student group on the T. Anne Cleary Walkway, "At that moment I knew that not everyone thought I belonged."

However, some students are still hopeful that the university can do better moving forward.

Another student wrote in a post, "#DoesUIowaLoveMe? Maybe not, but there's hope for a future where it does."

The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan serves as one of the first steps toward that future for the university.

According to Sarah Bruch, the co-chair of the charter committee on diversity, Dr. Lena Hill called a forum in the fall of 2017 where leadership on campus met to discuss where the University was doing well in regard to diversity, equity and inclusion and where improvements were needed. Campus leadership decided that they must gather data that went beyond racial composition and retention rates of faculty and staff.

"We realized that we knew very little in terms of data on how people are experiencing the campus environment," Bruch said, "so, what we decided to do was do a comprehensive assessment of campus climate."

Bruch took the lead on the data collection process which involved conducting listening sessions with students and staff and developing a survey that was administered last January to staff members. Developers also added questions to an existing survey for undergrads that were identical to the questions on the faculty and staff survey.

"Once we got all of that information, we also did listening sessions to understand the lived experiences of faculty and staff," Bruch said.

These listening sessions not only served as a way to further assess campus climate, but also allowed developers of the plan to ask students and staff what they thought the university's next steps should be. This generated ideas that were eventually incorporated into the final Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan.

The results from the listening sessions and data collection process were then used to form the plan's four overarching goals. Strategies and critical tasks are listed under each goal, and, according to Bruch, were primarily informed by ideas that students had in the listening sessions.

Bruch, however, was just one of many university officials in charge of some step in the process. Vice President for Student Life Melissa Shivers said that she played a key role as well.

"My role was to help coordinate the action steps to draft the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan. The surveys, listening sessions, and digest were coordinated and implemented as well," Shivers said.

Once the plan was in place, a development group of approximately 60 people was put together to form a concrete plan to achieve the goals that had been laid out. Bruch said that this included planning out what sorts of opportunities or events for marginalized groups of students need to take place more often on campus in the coming years.

While the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action plan lays out a multitude of critical tasks, some of the most important ones, according to Bruch, include "emphasizing the interconnected commitment to academic freedom, free expression, and a safe, supportive, inclusive environment as articulated in the university's purpose and mission statement."

"The campus right now has, in some ways, a somewhat limited capacity to do some of these things," said Bruch, "so we're giving the institution two years to do all of the things that we've specified in the plan so that, in two years from now when the university re-does its strategic plan, diversity, equity and inclusion will be more fully imbedded in that strategic plan."

The Path Forward group for diversity, equity and inclusion at UI is in charge of implementing the strategic plan over the next two years and will hold their first meeting next week. This group will set up concrete timelines for each strategy laid out in the plan and put mechanisms in place to track progress, Bruch said.

Moving forward, student feedback will continue to be an essential element in the success of the plan. Students will be represented in the Path Forward committee as well as in sub-committees that have roles in implementing and monitoring the plan's progress

While many students voiced their concerns during the #DoesUIowaLoveMe campaign, many are hopeful and retain an optimistic outlook on the future of diversity, equity and inclusion at UI.

In a quote included in the plan, University of Iowa Student Government President Hira Mustafa said, "For me personally, the University of Iowa making diversity, equity and inclusion efforts a priority gives me hope that the students who come after me, that look like me, have a family like mine or walk a similar path as me, will experience an Iowa that celebrates and supports them better than ever before.