

**2-3 Year DEIA Strategic Plan  
Cook County Higher Education (CCHE)  
prepared by Anne Phibbs, PhD, Strategic Diversity Initiatives  
June 23, 2021**

**Process**

In May, 2021, Cook County Higher Education (CCHE) began work with Anne Phibbs from Strategic Diversity Initiatives to develop a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Strategic Plan. Anne began work with the DEIA Strategic Planning Committee, made up of the following CCHE staff and two board members:

Adrea Beres	Karen Blackburn
Sue Hakes	Kelsey Rogers Kennedy
Paula Marie Powell	Carly Puch
Lenna Stever-Sobanja	

A full-day, virtual DEIA Strategic Planning session was held June 9, with a 2-hour DEIA workshop in the morning followed by strategic planning in the afternoon. Members of the Planning Committee reached out to community partners from across Cook County, inviting them to attend all or part of the day.

Approximately 25 people participated in the DEIA workshop, “Beyond Diversity 101: Micro-inequities, Implicit Bias, and Moving Toward Equity.” Approximately 10-12 people were able to participate in the afternoon DEIA strategic planning process.

The strategic planning process began with a review of CCHE’s current efforts around DEIA. Participants were also informed about CCHE’s recent efforts in forming an Anti-Racism Committee, and CCHE’s DEIA efforts to date were reviewed (please see sections following the goals for more information about these topics).

**Goals**

**At the end of the process, participants were then ready to identify 5-7 Short Term and 5-7 Long Term DEIA Goals for CCHE. After discussion, the following goals were identified. It is important to note that these goals are not listed in order of importance (participants chose not to rank these goals).**

**Short Term Goals (7):**

- 1. Mandatory DEIA training for staff and board; may also include specialized training for certain staff** (e.g., accessible communication training); institute “reboarding” process to bring board members up to date on CCHE’s DEIA efforts; board and staff revisit and revise DEIA Strategic Plan yearly.
- 2. Review and rewrite job descriptions, performance reviews, and board position descriptions using a DEIA lens.**

3. **Continue with current Policy & Procedure review using a DEIA lens.**
4. **Utilize a DEIA-focused Needs Assessment to better understand Cook County community needs;** this may entail reviewing past CCHE needs assessments and revise using a DEIA lens.
5. **Collect current demographic data of students and attendees;** this will allow CCHE to set benchmarks against which they can measure their DEIA efforts.
6. **Review current vendors and identify opportunities to diversify CCHE's vendors,** using minority-owned, women-owned, disability-owned, LGBTQ-owned, and/or veteran-owned businesses.
7. **Assess CCHE's physical space using a DEIA lens** (can include issues of accessibility, language, etc.) and make changes to increase access and inclusion.

#### **Long Term Goals (5): 2 to 3 Years**

1. **Build upon and improve CCHE's relationship with the Grand Portage community and services including but not limited to: Grand Portage Reservation Tribal Council, Grand Portage Department of Education, Grand Portage Community Center, Trust Lands Agency, Grand Portage Lodge and Casino, Grand Portage National Monument, Grand Portage Health Services, Grand Portage Human Services, as well as those that reside or work on the Grand Portage Reservation.** CCHE respects the Grand Portage Band Of Lake Superior Chippewa as a sovereign nation. CCHE staff and board strive to learn the history of the Grand Portage community and how it has been impacted by racism. CCHE will continue its community support and relationship-enriching efforts by being present and available, listening, asking questions, and moving forward with deference.
2. **Build upon and improve CCHE's relationship with students, teachers and administration at ISD 166.** CCHE appreciates the services and opportunities ISD 166 provides for its students and staff. CCHE will continue its community support and relationship-enriching efforts by asking ISD 166 how we can best provide support to students and staff. Working from a DEIA lens, CCHE will listen to community needs, share support resources (such as low cost laptops), provide CCHE building space for ISD 166 events as appropriate, and partner on tutoring, events, and opportunities. CCHE will look for ways to augment the dedicated work that ISD 166 provides to the benefit of our community and to assist ISD 166 when suitable.
3. **Rebrand CCHE using language that is accessible and accurate in describing what CCHE can offer the community.** This goal may require focus groups and interviews to determine what language is most effective in conveying CCHE's work to all members of the community.
4. **Increase the diversity (particularly in relation to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or BIPOC individuals) of CCHE's staff, board, students, and community partnerships.** CCHE will work to have its staff and board match the demographics of the communities it currently serves and those it wants to serve. This is a long term goal, as CCHE's size and location may make this goal more challenging, though still attainable.

5. **Become a recognized leader and resource around DEIA for other organizations in Cook County, including those in the business, educational, and nonprofit sectors.** This will require CCHE to continue its community outreach and relationship-building efforts, as well as utilizing an effective needs assessment tool, to ensure individuals and communities are understood and supported.

## CCHE Efforts to Date

The strategic planning process began with a review of CCHE's efforts around DEIA. **This includes the CCHE Statement of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility Intent:**

**Cook County Higher Education (CCHE) has prioritized the work necessary to create a learning environment where every student can succeed in learning and earning the education they desire. Our intention is to counteract discriminatory policies that prevent people from equally accessing the benefits of education.**

Participants were also informed about **CCHE's recent efforts in forming an Anti-Racism Committee:**

**When George Floyd was murdered, CCHE created an Anti-Racism Committee (ARC) to examine programs, policies, and procedures to identify how to bring a framework of anti-racism to the organization.** This seven-person committee included board members and staff.

**Mission:** ARC will examine programs, policies, and procedures at CCHE to identify how to bring a framework of anti-racism to the organization.

**Belief:** We understand that racist policies create significant barriers for Black, Indigenous, People of Color [BIPOC] seeking equity and success. We therefore recognize that these racist policies negatively impact our community as a whole.

**Vision:** CCHE's anti-racism efforts will contribute to positive change throughout our community.

**And CCHE's DEIA efforts to date were reviewed:**

- Self-examination of our own institution and culture to identify and remove policies and systems that create barriers.
- Promoting training for staff regarding Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility.
- Adding an accessibility plugin to our website.
- Adding a language translation plugin to our website.
- Creating programming that is inclusive of the diversity in our community: American Indian History, political, and language classes.

- Creating programming that seeks to educate participants about issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility from both a historical and current perspective.
- Seeking grants and donations to provide scholarships for event attendees and local scholarships – distributing approximately \$50,000 in tuition scholarships in the past year.
- Connecting with other non-profits in Cook County to form a coalition dedicated to equity work.
- Hiring a native speaker of Anishinaabemowin to create signs for our building, with the view of more fully representing the members of our community.
- Providing access to programming as a recording to allow for flexible remote learning.
- Distributing low-cost laptops – providing building, WIFI, and 24/7 computer access.
- Creating and using a Land Acknowledgement Statement.
- Hiring a DEIA Consultant to lead us through an DEIA Strategic Planning effort.
- Creating an action-oriented Anti-Racism Committee that includes Staff and Board Members.

## Current Landscape - Strengths/Barriers/Opportunities

**The strategic planning process began with participants identifying the current landscape of CCHE relative to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. This work focused on the following questions:**

**Strengths** – what has CCHE accomplished relative to DEIA; what buy-in for DEIA work exists?

**Barriers** – what might get in the way of CCHE’s DEIA efforts? How can we address these as we plan?

**Opportunities** – how can CCHE emerge from this process as a leader on DEIA?

The planning group’s answer to these questions are as follows:

### **Strengths**

- The variety of events and curricula around DEIA topics which CCHE has offered.
- Support for students; this support is expanding to younger students, creating the potential for a pipeline to guide students to all types of education after high school.
- 24/7 access to our building.
- Increased access to CCHE’s curricula via virtual and online options; recorded events, etc.
- Providing personable and accessible one-to-one service to all students and community members.
- Commitment to DEIA includes hiring a consultant and undertaking strategic planning
- Continuing to build community outreach efforts and partnerships which ensures CCHE is getting feedback from the community we serve.

## **Barriers**

There was significant discussion about the barriers that prevent connection between the Indigenous community at Grand Portage and the community in Grand Marais and Cook County. One participant, John from Grand Portage, spoke about the need for CCHE's staff and board to understand the history of how these relationships were broken – and how they are still broken. He urged CCHE to acknowledge and accept the negative history involving racism with Indigenous residents in Grand Portage, as this history is real and important to them. John shared that those in Grand Portage want to develop relationships, but that this needs to be done in the context of understanding the history in this area. John offered to share more of this history with the staff and board of CCHE.

Other barriers identified were:

- Having an all white staff and majority-white board will require ongoing education and learning.
- Learning needs to focus not just on issues of race, but also on age and LGBTQ issues; an example is that many of CCHE's students are 18-25 years old, while the board is made up of many who are considerably older and often retired.
- The board is committed to DEIA but there are still some issues and topics that are not on their radar.
- Traditional barriers: access to technology; times of educational offerings; variety of ways students and community members need to access CCHE's services.
- CCHE's name may be a barrier; for some "higher education" may not be the most understandable and accessible word; are we reaching everyone we can – or are some people not accessing us because of our name?
- For the people that do use our services, they may only know about or use one of our services but don't venture "outside this lane." How can we get people who access us for one service to connect to other services and educational offerings?
- We have experienced some pushback to our DEIA work.

## **Opportunities (what can help CCHE be seen as a leader on DEIA work?)**

- Breaking down barriers with our Indigenous students; creating connections with our Indigenous community.
- Breaking down barriers with ISD 166 students and staff; creating connections with ISD 166.
- Use a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach in all educational offerings.
- Continuing to do what we do, but also serve our communities better.
- Consider a needs assessment so we know we are meeting the needs that our community partners identify.
- Consider rebranding CCHE; can we move from "higher education" to more of an "educational nonprofit" focus? (how can we help those in our communities build platforms for their own work - this idea came from a discussion between a CCHE staff member and a local Indigenous woman)?
- Consider how we describe and name our services; what do we call our various educational opportunities? Develop a plan for what our terminology is, so that we know we are using language this is both clear and accessible – and that helps people understand what we offer.

- Continue to connect with other groups and organizations working on equity within Cook County. How can CCHE be a leader and role model on equity for the business community and larger community in Cook County?
- Continue to attend different community meetings; keep our ear to the ground; know our history in Cook County; listen to our community members; pay attention to what is important to people – this is what it means to lead around DEIA

## **Next Steps**

CCHE is committed to accomplishing the short and long term goals outlined in this document. The first step is to ask for feedback from those that attended the strategic planning session in June, 2021. Once feedback has been received and integrated, the plan will be finalized.

Participant feedback we would like to have includes the following: How do you think it looks? How would YOU implement goals? Do you want to be a part of the implementation process?

CCHE will not wait for the final plan to begin working on the long and short term goals. CCHE will prioritize work from the DEIA Strategic plan by setting internal staff goals and reviewing these goals every two months.

CCHE will continue to seek learning opportunities for the Board and Staff, and provide learning opportunities for the community around DEIA topics and issues.

## **Conclusion**

The national attention brought to DEIA issues by the murder of George Floyd offers CCHE the opportunity to do better. Through this document, community discussion, training and continuing efforts, CCHE can be a leader in the community in addressing the systemic inequities that hinder equal access to education. CCHE is committed to the work necessary to create a learning environment where every student can succeed in learning and earning the education they desire.