

Impact and Lessons Learned: Student Day at ETSU Equity and Inclusion Conference

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Addressing educational inequities has been the focus of institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion operations for many years. However, the recent crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic, the systemic racism and racial inequities in this country —has prompted a clarion call for more effective strategies that will result in more equitable outcomes for vulnerable student populations on our campuses. By promoting the importance of a diverse campus, adopting an equity-minded approach to leadership, and facilitating greater inclusion, institutional leaders can ensure that our institutions deliver on the nation’s promise of higher education for all students. The Office of Equity and Inclusion at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) organizes and hosts an annual equity and inclusion conference. The main goal of the conference is to engage campus community in meaningful conversation around topics of equity and inclusion. After moving the conference to a fully online virtual platform in 2021, due to the pandemic, (which exposed inequities among our students, faculty, and employees and illuminated the importance of addressing the different needs across these populations), a silver lining arose that shed light into how to address such inequities from the students’ perspectives. For the past two years ETSU’s Equity and Inclusion conference has dedicated the third and final day of conference proceedings to students, as a student-track day for student-focused conference proceedings. Sessions offered during the student-track day are full of student focused activities, topics and needs made available to all students, both locally and abroad. In fact, each session of the student-track day involved participatory student input throughout the planning process. Some of the topics discussed in the 2022 student-track conference proceedings were a sense of belonging; students mental health; full disclosure: speaking your truth student panel; inclusive student leadership and resilience. The student day provided students a platform to discuss equity and inclusion issues that impact them every day and develop and/or increase their skills related to equity and inclusion contexts. The day also helped them increase their awareness, recognize the benefits of a diverse organization and community and the importance of equitable and inclusive practices, policies, and procedures. This paper describes the planning of the student day, lessons learned, and assessment of the student day.

INTRODUCTION

A diverse university community opens all students up to a broader range of perspectives, enable them to be global thinkers and actors, to respect diverse values, and to attain a competitive edge as well-rounded and creative leaders in their fields [1]. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has long been an important part of personal, professional, and curricular development for university faculty, yet students continue to voice a desire for improved engagement with concepts of race, racism, bias, cultural awareness and social justice in the classroom and professional setting. As a results, most institutions of higher education have design and implement diversity initiatives, policies, programs, and practices so that students receive the necessary support [2].

Just over four years ago, East Tennessee State University (ETSU), as part of its Equity and Inclusion strategic vision, established its first Equity & Inclusion Conference. The conference was established as part of the overall vision of educating the faculty, staff and students whom the university serves, including the region and state. ETSU's story began in 1911 when the State of Tennessee sought to uplift the region through education. This goal helped to improve the life prospects of countless citizens in our region and beyond. Many of our citizens, however, African Americans in particular, were left behind as de jure segregation prevented African Americans from enrolling into ETSU. Only court orders, especially *Brown v. Board of Education*, finally opened the door to integration. African American faculty did not exist on the campus prior to the mid-to-late 1970s. And the institution struggled to hire and retain faculty into the 1990s. ETSU, by the end of the 20th century, increasingly reflected a world that was rapidly changing. Those advancements began with racial diversity but increasingly included gender diversity, sexual diversity, differing abilities, religious diversity, and ethnic diversity. ETSU is more diverse today than at any other time in its history.

The conference was a celebration of the university's central institutional mission: to educate people without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, or place of origin. Various sessions were built to discuss practical ways all faculty, staff, and administrators can improve and promote ETSU's goal of being welcoming and accepting of everyone. Further, the conference focused on the basic humanity of every person and reasonable expectation that every person deserves respect. There were keynote speakers, panels and a host of presentations. Given the nature of the conference, a conference platform was used to encourage ongoing dialog among the

participants and allowing those who were not able to participate to go back and experience the conference virtually.

The most recent 4th annual Equity and Inclusion conference demonstrated the university's continued commitment to equity and inclusion. This paper is particularly focused on the Student Day of the conference, a day full of student focused activities, topics, sessions and discussions. The student day provided students a platform to discuss equity and inclusion issues that impact them every day at ETSU and in their community. The objective of this paper is to provide an assessment of the Student Day, lessons learned and ways to improve Student Day experiences in the conference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ETSU's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access. Integral to this mission is supporting efforts to create diverse and welcoming campus communities for all students. Research shows that institutions' commitment and implementation of practices toward diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) have positively impacted students and campus cultures [3, 4, 5]. There has been an increase in institutional strategic activities including institutional political commitment and broader efforts to create supportive institutional climates [6]. However, institutionalizing DEI should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a single action or outcome and requires the buy-in of all institutional stakeholders. As such, certain institutions are further along in their diversity efforts than others, and the process is neither linear nor uniform across institutions [7].

Many higher education institutions have implemented DEI focused programs such as training, lunch and learn to infuse DEI in curriculum and research, mentorship, multicultural activities, community engagement etc. for faculty and staff. Studies show that these programs are effective in terms of faculty development, student success and improved retention [8, 9]. Despite these efforts, many students especially marginalized students still experience mistreatment and undue barriers in their education. It has been argued that actively engaging students in university experiences should be one core aspect in equalizing DEI gaps [10].

Higher education institutions have the opportunity to play an important role in advocating social change in the areas of racial and gender inequality and other human rights issues through the intentional design and implementation of programmatic interventions that promote self-

awareness, understanding, civic engagement, and social justice [11, 12]. A college experience should not only teach students the necessary skills to exist in a diverse society with honor, respect, and dignity but should also facilitate and foster experiences that expand students' knowledge about how to deconstruct social inequalities [13]. In order to do that, postsecondary institutions must be intentional in exposing students to difference through curriculum and program interventions. In order to provide ETSU student a high-impact experience about DEI, the 3rd ETSU equity and inclusion annual conference added a separate student day, which was continued in the 4th annual conference.

ETSU EQUITY AND INCLUSION CONFERENCE AND STUDENT DAY

The Equity & Inclusion Conference is a three-day celebration of the institution's mission to educate the campus community without regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, or place of origin. The roots of this annual conference started in the fall of 2019 as a broad measure to honor and recognize the rich diversity throughout the Appalachian Highland region of eastern Tennessee. With the first year of the conference being in-person to transitioning to virtual and hybrid format following the COVID pandemic, the conference has remained steady in becoming one of the most notable and highly regarded events throughout the campus community.

A yearly theme is given for the conference that prepares both the presenters and the attendees to be cognizant of. The conference proceedings consist of two days of faculty and staff-focused content from experts across the region and nation. The final and third day of the conference has a student-centered focus that is dedicated to the student body. Both local and national speakers are invited to present on topics regarding their expertise through a student-focused lens. The intent for the entire conference proceedings has and remains to be a method of equipping the campus community at large to be a pillar of the value set forth by the University, where:

- People come first, are treated with dignity and respect, and are encouraged to achieve their full potential
- Relationships are built on honesty, integrity, and trust
- Diversity of people and thought is respected
- Excellence is achieved through teamwork, leadership, creativity, and a strong work ethic
- Efficiency is achieved through wise use of human and financial resources and
- Commitment to intellectual achievement is embraced.

This section of our paper will discuss the planning process and key highlights of the student track day from the conference proceedings.

The process of the planning and executing a three-day event can be arduous. While there are others whom one can reach out to for planning, acumen, and guidance towards a conference planning process, a collaborative and full commitment of teamwork is what drives the direction of a conference becoming a solid bridge of connections. The Equity and Inclusion conference formalizes a leadership team comprised of numerous University faculty, staff, students, and community partners. Individuals identified to serve on the leadership team are selected by previous members who have served on the conference's leadership committee. The leadership team starts the planning process for the next conference immediately at the close of the previous year's conference proceedings. A yearlong process of conference development starts with emails, meetings, zooms, ideas, and discussions taking wind.

The Conference leadership committee assembles to discuss the previous years successes, challenges, and new considerations on an ongoing basis, meeting between three to four times a month during the initial stage of developing the conference's theme and agenda for the upcoming year. While the leadership committee is comprised of collaborators from across the University's campus and the local community, subcommittees are created to perform exclusive programming for the conference proceedings. Four subcommittees are created out of the leadership team consisting of a logistics and technology committee; marketing and outreach committee; program planning committee and student-track committee. Each of these subcommittees served to assist, guide, and direct the overall planning process of the three-day event.

The one-day student-track portion of the conference provides students with a student-centered approach to the conference proceedings. A day filled with events, invigorating sessions, food, guest presenters, along with fellow undergraduate, graduate, and alumni from across campus and local region engage on topics pertinent to student issues.

The student-track planning committee consisted of four members with two of its members serving as co-chairs from the leadership team. The title and position of each committee member ranged between Dean of Student Engagement/Director of Assessment, Associate Professor, Lecturer, and Coordinator of Access & Success Programs/Graduate Student. All members of the student-track committee come from various locations, identities, ethnic and national backgrounds. Two members of the committee have international backgrounds. During the

initial stage of formalizing the student-track committee one of the original co-chairs, who was a graduate student and full-time employee of the University, received an offer of employment elsewhere, in which, our Dean of Student Engagement/Director of Assessment was able to replace. Operating as a four-person working group the student track team successfully arranged a day of student-centered conference proceedings.

Committee members from the student track team met up to 9 months, holding between one to two meetings monthly starting in mid-February until September for the conference kickoff. The two co-chairs met on a regular basis with the leadership team and by themselves up to three times monthly. An outline of ideas and a working agenda with session titles for the conference was created through the committees thought processing. The sessions for the student-track day would consist of a hybrid format with presenters from a wide range of backgrounds to discuss topics regarding the conference theme of *Creating a Culture of Belonging: Building Capacity, Partnerships and Opportunities for Progress*.

Sessions for the student-track day consisted of AM and PM time slots. There were a total of 8 sessions with two concurrent sessions embedded in the conference agenda. Each session for the conference would last an hour with moderators in place to facilitate each session. The student-track agenda included guests ranging from a local Appalachian journalist, a director of diversity, equity and inclusion, an associate Vice Chancellor, a peer coordinator, faculty member, graduate student presenter and a panel of undergraduate and graduate student presenters. Session topics included data collecting and citizen journalism; the importance of marginalized students developing a sense of belonging on college campuses and communities; substance abuse and students mental health; the value of recognizing and appreciating one's gifts and talents to their greater community; inclusive leadership on campus and within student body organizations; and a full disclosure-speaking our truth student panel.

Throughout the planning stage of arranging the student-track sessions, the committee sought to promote students' voices, concerns, and matters that would be relevant to the campus environment student needs. One key area of intentional promotion for student voice was an endeavor that the campus was undertaking involving the use of storytelling and a TEDx-like presentation style. A campus wide email invitation was sent to students, faculty, and staff to apply to participate in an TEDx-X University presentation. Participants of this TEDx style presentation would be able to present on a topic of their interest that has had a significant impact

on their development, sense of identity or self. After a final selection was made of presenters for the TEDx presentation, the student-track committee requested to receive a list of the remaining presenters, of which the committee could reach out to and request their interests in presenting at the Equity and Inclusion Conference for the student track day. An outreach to the student presented was shared via email requesting their interest and ability to participate in the student track conference day. Two presenters from the TEDx original list presented eventually became student-track presenters for the conference.

The day before the conference began arrangements were made to have a pre-Conference kick off with a notable, recognized, and trendy guest presenter. The pre-Conference kickoff took place the night before the student track day began with an evening dinner and invited guest, Mr. Bryan Terrell Clark, actor, and star in the Broadway musical *Hamilton* being the guest speaker. On the day that the Conference began a grounding and land acknowledgement took place. To honor and set the stage for the student track proceedings. The student day was filled with lots of energy and excitement as the early morning grounding session and land acknowledgement created an offering of peace for engaged learning to take precedence.

One of the key highlights and greatest number of participants for the student-track day was the student panel. The student panel consisted of four in-State College and University student participants. A total of seven students from these regional Colleges and Universities came together to share their voices and perspectives on the topic of “*Full Disclosure-Speaking Your Truth*” as a collective voice regarding their experiences a college undergraduate and graduate student. Students on this panel were given questions presented by a moderator to discuss their thoughts and feelings regarding their successes and challenges as college student, how their identity has played a role in their successes or presented any challenges; what advice the student panel would offer to their peers or anyone interested in going to college; and what can professors, staff, and administration do to make underrepresented students experiences better. This was the first time that the Equity and Inclusion conference offered such a panel of diverse students to disclose their thoughts in their modality. The voices of the student panel participants opened the door for a safe space to be created for each student to share their unique perspective. Both the attendees and participants in this session were able to gravitate to one another’s story while boosting a sense of belonging, confidence, and a connection with their current institution and future transfer institutions. The success of this session included feedback stating for more

collaboration to be implemented in this manner; encouragement for students to continue speaking their truth; and for fellow students, faculty, staff, and administrators to pay attention to the voices and needs expressed by these students to bring greater understanding to the campus community of student needs.

A great benefit to the entire student-track day would be the impact and exposure it gave to our international students. Based on feedback shared from the hybrid online attendee's comments regarding the ability to attend the conference through hybrid format was appreciated. Understanding the needs and expressions of our international students is a key area that our student-track future committees would benefit in seeking. One international student shared that the conference allowed them to feel connected to the internal network of their campus community. Another international student stated that this was their first inland Conference since being in the United States. Having the conference offered by the University was profound to this student's connection to the University by way of it promoting a unified sense of learning, growth, and development as society of people. Another attendee of the conference shared that from having attended the student-track sessions of the conference they felt empowered to use their voice and status as a student and student leader to transform the systems that may oftentimes excludes the voice of "others."

The student-track day concluded with a debriefing session. The ending of the conference sought to bring together all students and community participants back together to share their thoughts and lessons learned from the conferences theme. A few key lessons learned throughout this conference were the cognizant value that student's voices have in sharing their experiences and wisdom as an undergraduate and graduate student. The importance of valuing student's abilities as unique adult learners while some are in this space for the first time without any prior examples of seeing what it is like to be attaining a degree. How educators can build connections of inclusivity with their students through the various activities that are implemented in the classroom setting. The student-track day provided not only a student-centered focus of learning content and informative knowledge to support the student's voices and needs, it yielded an intentional framework that can be used as to measure inform our practice as educators.

ANALYSIS OF FEEDBACK AND LESSONS LEARNED

On the Student-track Day, just like first two days of the conference, evaluation forms were distributed among the session participants after each session. The evaluations asked participants to respond to the following statements on the Likert scale from Strongly Disagree through Strongly Agree:

- Attending this session was worthwhile.
- I learned something while attending this session.
- I plan to incorporate what I've learned from this session in my work.
- The presenters in this session spoke with knowledge of the topic discussed.

Unfortunately, not many participants completed evaluations for the sessions. The authors summarized the rating of each session and reviewed any written comments that the participants left on the evaluation forms. Even though we have not conducted any formal qualitative analysis at this point, in the feedback received the value of involving students in this initiative was reinforced. Within the evaluation feedback we received, the highest rated sessions involving students included the student panel entitled *Full Disclosure: Speaking Your Truth* and trivia hosted for the main conference at lunch by the ETSU student group known as Diversity Educators. These sessions had comparatively higher attendance both in-person and online, and evaluation data indicated that the sessions increased participants' knowledge and gave participants actionable information they could incorporate in their life/work. The panel discussion featured students from a variety of higher education institutions including a community college as well as small and mid-size publics across the state. Engagement with the students in question and answer during the panel discussion, as well as anecdotal accounts following the session, indicated that this was, perhaps, one of the most valuable aspects of the conference as well. Individuals expressed gratitude for the students sharing their stories about challenges related to being a minority attending a predominately white campus, as well as their advice for ways that underrepresented students should be supported and can succeed in spite of those challenges.

Early in the planning process, the student track committee expressed desire to offer the student sessions in person only. The rationale for this recommendation came from the preceding 3 semesters of zoom fatigue accumulated among our students, the acknowledgement that attention is divided when attending online, and most importantly the interactive nature of each of

the presentations chosen specifically for the student track. Many of the sessions involved simulation, hands-on, and small groups work, which is ideally executed in an in-person environment. There was a great deal of debate about conducting the track entirely in-person due to nearly two years of “pivoting” late in the planning process in reaction to worsening pandemic trends. For this reason, the committee agreed that planning the full conference in a hybrid format would best position the team for last minute adjustments if, for community health or any other reason, we were obliged to limit or eliminate large in-person gatherings.

One of the unfortunate findings of conducting the conference in this hybrid format was that, while offering an online option may increase total registration, giving that option severely decreases the number of participants who will take advantage of the in-person opportunities. The result is that few, if any, registrants (especially students) attend the full day’s activities, and those who do attend at a high rate are typically not fully engaged in the proceedings. Simulations that involve physical movement or visual elements created in groups by participants are much more difficult to perform in the virtual environment, and our presenters were challenged with adapting on-site to an almost entirely online audience.

While a few students were involved in the direction of a few of the sessions (panel discussion, trivia, and several of our short-15-minute presentations) students were not significantly involved with the planning committee directly. In considering changes for next year, this is the first: Invite student leaders to engage with the committee from the outset so that their input is considered early in the planning process, and these students can become ambassadors for engaging more students on the day of the event itself. Additional adjustments to the program would include changing the times of each session to align with class scheduling for the day. We found that several faculty were willing to release their classes to attend specific sessions, but the way our schedule was structured, students experienced overlap with more than one class for each session, creating a scheduling hurdle that we can prevent in the future. Another recommendation for future planning now that Universities are back to fully in-person operations, is to no longer offer an online option for the student track. This will likely decrease the number of students who register, but we feel strongly that it will result in an increase in those attending in person and significantly improve the experience and impact that is made by the conference. The last, and likely most important lesson, is that students should be heard throughout the conference. Providing a medium through which student experiences can be heard

and considered first-hand is valuable not only for the professionals who are working to support these students, but also for their peers to recognize that they are not alone.

CONCLUSION

The 4th Annual Equity and Inclusion Conference at ETSU was a huge success. The student day and its sessions brought students voices front and center. Assessment of data shows session topics, student stories and activities have enhanced students' knowledge and experiences. This has also provided a venue for ETSU faculty, staff and leader to engage with students, understand their challenges and barriers and provided them with ideas about how learning experiences can be made inclusive to support the success of all students. Lessons learned will be reviewed and implemented in the next conference by engaging students early during the planning process and empowering them to lead the student day. We strongly believe higher education can achieve its mission and deliver on the promise of access for all if they institutionalize DEI practices and embrace equity-minded approaches by engaging entire campus community. Only then will colleges and universities be better positioned to effectively ensure equitable educational access for an increasingly diverse population.

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