University Task Force on Individual, Institutional and Systemic Bias

The Executive Committee of the Task Force on Individual, Institutional and Systemic Bias on July 31, 2019 approved in concept several preliminary recommendations of task force work groups for referral to appropriate administrative units to explore implementation. Specific details of implementing the frameworks set forth in the recommendations will be developed by these units, with in-depth consideration of associated concerns and processes, after which the recommendations will presented to senior leadership for adoption.
COMMUNICATION, DATA SYSTEMS AND REPORTING WORK GROUP

QUESTION #4
Communications – How do we balance responsible reporting and engagement? How can we be more transparent in our communications?

Task.ISB Executive Committee Meeting – July 31, 2019
Problem/Situation

• VCU has a central communications unit (University Relations) and also has communications that are handled in separate units. This decentralization allows for communications to be varied and multiple, which serves the institution well. However, it also can lead to differing approaches to communication practices, which may be viewed as inconsistent and may result in ineffective communication.

• Units have little guidance about how to best operationalize and reflect VCU’s values in their communications.

• VCU’s choices about how to communicate its relationship to diversity and inclusion frames how its work in these areas is received and accepted.

• VCU units vary drastically in terms of their understanding and approach to transparency.
Research

• Too often, a communications plan is overlooked, but it is one of the most crucial areas for D&I strategy. Additionally, there is ample research on how communication overall shapes the cultural values of an organization, even in unintended ways.

• Bowen & Blackman (2003) explain that people are willing to be honest and transparent when they feel that their views will be supported; if they do not believe there is support, employees remain silent. This creates a spiral of silence in which marginalized voices remain unheard and dominant voices are amplified, creating the appearance that the organizational voice is heterogeneous; however, it simply recreates the dominant structure.

• Communications sets the tone for how internal and external communities read/perceive, interpret and believe VCU’s commitment to its core values. VCU would be well served to engage in critical analyses of audience, mode and message to design distinct, complex and diverse messages that reflect VCU’s distinct and complex diversity.
Recommendations

VCU would be best served by developing best-practices guidelines for how we communicate around issues of diversity and inclusion. Some of this is already in place, but is not consistent across offices.

1. Establish consistent, university-wide guidelines for what diversity and inclusion information, including data, must be made publicly available by VCU units. These common guidelines would assure units utilize data in appropriate and comprehensive ways that reflect accurate representation of the unit.
   a. An implementation plan could be created for the units, providing a grace period for when this information would need to be made public, thus providing an opportunity to address/improve any areas ahead of time.

2. Create and execute an educational campaign for unit administrators and the network of university communicators, making them aware of the information available through all pertinent offices (OIRDS, HR, ICO, EAS, SEM, etc.) and providing examples/best practices for using this data.

3. Develop and execute a process enacted by university senior leadership to define transparency and to articulate its central role in upholding the university’s mission and values; and identify approaches to operationalize it across various levels of the university.

4. Create and execute a communications campaign around transparency, which clearly spells out the university’s commitment to transparency, defines the metrics it expects all units to report (either internally, externally, or both), and speaks to the importance of transparency.

5. Implement institution-wide training for university communicators that includes data utilization and ways in which data can hinder inclusion and approaches to mitigate such practices.