

## Strategic Theme: Diversity

**Introduction:** USD has made great strides toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. In part, this has been informed by accreditation recommendations, as well as recognition of what university members need in order to be successful and to collectively pursue excellence.

### I. Background

The University of South Dakota has been grappling with the issues of diversity and inclusion for nearly 20 years, dating back to the 2001 North Central Association Report when our reviewers remarked that we lacked a clear definition of diversity and needed to create an environment that embraced all students. Fast forward to the 2011 Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Report, we still lacked “a rigorous, systematic, and effective approach to addressing institutional diversity.” A number of strategic steps have been taken over the years to intentionally work on these challenges and opportunities. These steps have been taken while recognizing the state and regional context of the USD, our location in the upper midwest, in a predominantly White/Caucasian state, with a significant history and population of indigenous peoples, and our rural setting.

#### Diversity Timeline

1955 - Institute of American Indian Studies  
1957 - Tiospaye Student Council  
1972 - USD Wacipi  
1986 - Native American Cultural Center  
1996 - Building Bridges Conference  
1997 - Native American Studies Program  
2000 - Native American Law Student Association  
2001 - Campus Diversity Enhancement Group  
2005 - Office for Diversity & Campus Diversity Officer  
2006 - Native Student Services Director  
2010 - USD Partnership with Indian University of North America at Crazy Horse Memorial  
2010 - Native American Academic Advisor  
2012 - Assoc. Vice President for Diversity  
2013 - Adopted Inclusive Excellence  
2014 - Center for Diversity & Community  
2014 - Student Veterans Resource Center

Since 2012, USD’s Associate Vice President for Diversity, leading the Office for Diversity and serving as a senior advisor to the university, has been a champion for the strategic organizing principle of Inclusive Excellence, a national model produced by the American Association of Colleges & Universities. Inclusive Excellence at USD means:

- Diversity is broadly defined to include, but not limited to race/ethnicity, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, first-generation status, veterans status, disability status, socio-economic status, class, rural status, urban status, and many other identities;
- A commitment to embedding equity and inclusion into all aspects of the university; and
- Making the pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion everyone’s responsibility.

USD now has diversity and inclusive excellence committees functioning in each college, school, and major division of the university that is focused on the challenges and opportunities in their particular area. Additionally, there is a growing list of resource areas and providers with some of the most prominent being the Center for Diversity & Community, Native American Cultural Center/Native Student Services, and Student Veterans Resource Center.

Additionally, USD recognizes that the Supreme Court has sustained the “trust responsibility” to the tribes. Consequently, federal, state, and local governments have a unique obligation for the education of Indian peoples. As such, state and federally funded educational institutions must address the culturally related social and academic needs of American Indians using high culturally appropriate educational standards and appropriate student performance goals.

The University of South Dakota will continue to ensure that the support and academic programs that serve American Indian people are of the highest quality and provide for their unique culturally related academic needs in collaboration with a committee of American Indian experts and elders.

## **II. Current State of Diversity at the USD/Lessons Learned**

The current strategic plan includes diversity and inclusiveness as an area to address. The three goals are:

*Goal 1: Commit to a systematic, intentional, comprehensive, and holistic approach to diversity and inclusive excellence.*

*Goal 2: Integrate diversity and inclusive excellence into all areas of university life.*

*Goal 3: Become a regional leader in initiatives and outreach for inclusive excellence and diversity.*

Based on the strategic goals in the current strategic plan, with leadership from the Office for Diversity, the University has made notable progress in integrating the topic of diversity into everyday conversation. This integration began with the creation of an Inclusive Excellence Guidebook for reporting on activities pertaining to Diversity by Schools and Departments. Diversity statements have subsequently been developed and added into promotion, recruitment, and hiring materials, and also in course syllabi throughout the University.

The current strategic plan formed the basis for USD’s accreditation (HLC) Open Pathways Quality Initiative specifically designed to address the recruitment, retention, success, and graduation of students of color. One of our initial realizations was that the racial/ethnic data needed to be broken down into narrower categories to understand better what was going on with our students of color. We found stark achievement gaps in retention and graduation between Native American, Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Asian American students and their White/Caucasian peers. The usefulness of this information led to targeted changes in various areas of student support and academics. These changes include:

- Reinstatement of the Native American Academic Advisor position;
- Retaining the Multicultural Recruitment Coordinator;
- Faculty training and development of academic program goals;
- Student Success Team conducted process audit and mapping to identify gaps that allow students to “slip through” the cracks; and
- Associate Vice President added to Executive Council, Provost & Deans Councils, Student Success Team, and Support Center Review Committee for the university budget for greater coordination of efforts across the university.

USD faculty and staff have had success in being granted millions of dollars over the past ten years for efforts related to students of color and other marginalized populations. These grant dollars have had some success in moving the needle for the target populations. However, in many instances there have not been funds in place to continue the work at grant-funded levels, leading to us abandoning some programs and not seeing continued gains.

Training and professional development opportunities have come and gone with little follow-through. USD has hosted national and regional experts on a wide range of diversity-related topics, with good participation from faculty and staff. Some of the difficulty that remains is integrating those training concepts into our everyday practice and limited accountability measures in place. Therefore, we continue to struggle with the climate for diversity on campus that leads to retention issues for faculty, staff, and students.

While much progress has been made, there is still much work to be done. First, there is a need for consistency in programming for diversity, equity, and inclusion so that there are not stop-and-start or one-time occurrences, without meaningful outcomes. Secondly, as a university, we must make diversity a core character theme for the University, so that it does not appear as if programming on this issue is only for the purpose of accreditation. Secondly, as a university, we should continue to commit to embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion, not merely as a check-box for accreditation, but as a core value and characteristic of a global 21st Century institution.

### **III. National Trends/External Picture**

Nationally, colleges and universities are becoming keenly aware that the scope of institutions extends far beyond the campus borders. Due to technology and ease of travel, people are no longer isolated in their own geographic regions. Because of the global nature of human interactions, combined with the changing demographics across the country and even in our state, the students we educate at USD will certainly find themselves interacting with people from diverse backgrounds during their careers.

As a university, we must recognize and respond to the criticism of higher education and diversity efforts. This requires proactive engagement with legislators, business leaders, Native American stakeholders (tribal leadership, educational entities, and business interests), international interests, and other external stakeholders. Each has a valuable perspective that should impact how we address their varied needs and our students' preparation.

Therefore, our responsibility to our students is clear, we must prepare them to effectively participate in this global and diverse workforce of today. The best way to achieve that objective is to expose them to diversity in all its forms in and outside the classroom, through intentional, academic and practical programming. Additionally, our responsibility to our employees, faculty, and staff is to ensure continued learning and professional development opportunities to address the needs of our diverse student body. Collectively, we have a responsibility to foster an environment that is welcoming, has meaningful engagement across diverse identities, and provides for each individual the ability to be successful.

## **IV. Continued Improvement and Future Opportunities**

The USD's work on diversity is not beginning from nothing. Already, we have made much progress. One of those areas in which we have made progress is in assessing the campus climate to determine to what extent the University environment is supportive of Diversity. This is developed with the notion that the things listed below are addressing the changing demographics in South Dakota and our university's response and investment. Now, we need to build on that foundation. To do that, we need to:

### **Continue**

- To refine what diversity means to us as an institution. Without that clarity, it is difficult to know which course of action to take with any measure of certainty;
- To effectively use data (quantitative and qualitative) for continuous improvement of all aspects of the university, with particular attention to equitable outcomes for all faculty, staff, and students;
- Quantitative and qualitative assessment of the campus climate for diversity on a regular cycle and making data-driven decisions based on the results;
- To address the needs of international students: recruitment, admission, transition, retention, and graduation;

### **Improve**

- Robust training and professional development plan with follow-up and accountability measures;
- Engagement of diverse alumni through opportunities to give back -- mentorship, scholarships, and areas of expertise;
- Provision of culturally responsive training and development opportunities for University students, faculty, and staff;
- Promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a core, organic part of the University culture where every member of the University community takes responsibility;

### **Establish**

- Targeted goals and objectives for student, faculty and staff recruitment with support for achievement;
- Targeted goals and objectives for student, faculty, and staff retention with support for achievement;
- A comprehensive and holistic plan for building and repairing relationships with Native American sovereign tribal nations, educational entities, health & human services, and business interests;
- Open forums (in-person & online) for interactions with diversity;
- A means for assessment and evaluation of the way diversity, equity, and inclusion are embedded into the curriculum, coursework, programming, and responsibilities of employees;
- New and strengthen existing local community relationships towards an improved environment for diversity in the community in which we live, learn, and work;
- New and strengthen existing state/regional stakeholder relationships to address our collective needs and mutual benefit.