



MINNESOTA STATE
Office of Equity and Inclusion

Equity by Design:

A Tool for Developing
Shared Language

Creating Shared Language for Equity & Inclusion Efforts

The purpose of this tool is to help campuses build consensus around key foundational concepts related to equity and inclusion. The activities in this tool serve as a starting point for engaging in difficult conversations and to ensure everyone is on the same page before engaging in the process of examining equity gaps.

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Importance of Shared Language

For campuses to effectively engage and advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work, stakeholders (administrators, faculty, staff, and students) must be on the same page about their understanding of the challenges/issues, as well as what are the way forward for addressing the challenges. In order to get to this point, there is a critical need for all involved to establish common language, so that the work can be grounded with a shared understanding of key foundational concepts salient to EDI work (such as race, racism, and equity).

Creating shared language calls for moving beyond simple definitions and requires individuals and campus teams to engage in meaningful conversations of what the terms conceptually represent and mean for the stakeholders. While this guide will provide some key terms and definitions, the greatest benefit will occur when your campus/team/organization develops a shared understanding of what these terms and concepts mean within your respective campus context.

The importance of shared understanding and communication for any work cannot be understated. After all, miscommunication and/or misaligned perspectives related to key concepts can impede work and lead to frustration. For example, while the terms equity and equality are often used interchangeably, they in fact represent different concepts.

Understanding Allyship

For many people, engaging in conversations about some of the key concepts in this guide can be extremely difficult. It is not uncommon to feel ill-equipped to discuss difficult or unfamiliar topics and terms. As with all equity journeys – you must start somewhere. You must come into the space knowing that it will be challenging, and to some extent discomfort, resistance, and conflict is unavoidable.

Becoming a strong ally requires each of us to share personal experiences, be vulnerable, challenge assumptions, listen to understand (not to defend), and commit to the difficult journey of personal and professional growth. As an ally, you make a commitment to actively:

- Educate yourself about oppression;
- Listen to those who are targets of oppression and seek to learn;
- Recognize and accept that you have prejudices, stereotypes, and assumptions – examine them and challenge them;
- Seek to understand your feelings of defensiveness, guilt, and shame if they arise;
- Commit to changing policies, practices, and structures that give rise to inequity. Do so in concert with marginalized groups;
- Center the voices and experiences of historically minoritized groups. Remember – listen to understand, *not* to respond.

Creating Space for Building Shared Language

Developing shared language is a critical component to deeper collaboration. After all, if you can't create shared language, you will not be able to collectively agree to shared solutions! To set the stage for developing common understanding and shared language, teams must intentionally create the space and time for this engagement to occur.

The process of creating shared language requires patience, mutual respect, tolerance, and determining an end goal. You must also recognize that people are coming to this space with very different backgrounds and at different places in their equity journeys. Below are a few questions to get your team started before moving into defining terms.

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions collectively:

1. Describe *why* it is important to pursue developing shared language as a group
2. Explore *how* to develop shared language.
3. Individually, share *why* you are taking part in this work and what it means to be vulnerable.

Key Concepts and Terms

Varying definitions and views can lead to misunderstandings or divergent objectives, and at its worst – erode trust. This is one of the most common ways that equity work can become derailed because while people are using the same terms, they may be using them with a different understanding in mind. For example, ask your team to anonymously write down their understanding of “Racism” and then collect the answers and read them back to the group. You will likely have several divergent answers that have multiple meanings.

Having common language lays the groundwork for productive conversations and can help prevent assumptions or misaligned understandings. The process of creating shared language and common understanding will inform how the campus team and stakeholders view and realize equity and inclusion.

For comprehensive look into developing equity-minded language, please reference the [Equity by Design Campus Team Toolkit](#). Additionally, please reference the [Terms of Equity and Inclusion](#) for standard definitions to some of the below terms. As mentioned previously, your team will want to spend time reflecting on what these terms and concepts mean for your campus and community context.

Key Concepts and Terms to Define

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anti-racist / Anti-racism | <input type="checkbox"/> Inclusion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deficit-Minded | <input type="checkbox"/> Marginalized |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diversity | <input type="checkbox"/> Minority |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Equality | <input type="checkbox"/> Power |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Equity | <input type="checkbox"/> Racism (cultural, institutional, structural) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Equity-Minded | |

After defining these terms, think about them conceptually. Again, the greatest benefit will occur when your campus/team/organization develops a shared understanding of what these terms and concepts mean within your respective campus context. After settling on a shared understanding for key terms, campuses should make the terms and concepts widely available to their campus community.

Process for Developing Shared Language

Now that everyone on your team has spent time defining and reflecting on some key terms and concepts, it's time to move into developing shared language. Here are some guiding questions and suggestions to consider during this process.

- *As a team consider what terms and concepts are important for having shared understanding and consistent definition?*
- *Determine the process by which your group will establish and come to shared agreement.*
- *Identifying resources for defining terms and concepts.*
- *Consider how language shapes how your campus discusses student success, student outcomes, patterns in data, and development of strategies/solutions. The language we use often includes elements of power, privilege, bias, and perspectives.*
- *Determine and adopt consistent definitions that reflect institutions context and values, particularly equity, diversity, and inclusion. These are interdependent terms that matter for collaboration and pursuing change.*
- *Develop a set of questions aimed self-reflection on the understanding of important terms.*
- *Conduct individual and team exercises that encourage reflection on meaning of key terms, such as the activities included in this guide.*

Activity: Equity-Minded versus Deficit-Minded

This activity was adapted from Center for Urban Education. (2020). *Laying the groundwork: Concepts and activities for racial equity work*. Los Angeles, CA: Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California.

A fundamental component to Equity by Design is developing the ability to recognize and differentiate between deficit-minded language and phrases versus equity-minded language. This activity is aimed at broadening your understanding of deficit- and equity-mindedness. For additional information on the meaning of these key concepts, please reference the [Equity by Design Campus Team Toolkit](#).

Objectives:

1. To improve practitioner understanding of key concepts related to Equity by Design, specifically equity- and deficit-mindedness.
2. To create shared understanding for these terms and ensure everyone on the team is operating from the same foundational understanding.

Activity Description

- **Time Commitment:** Up to two (2) hours
- **Audience:** Faculty, Staff, Administrators, and/or Deans

Facilitator Notes:

Step 1: Review the Statements

If conducting this activity virtually, send the statements to participants individually using the chat (or similar) function, or create a virtual collaboration board (such as Google Jamboard) to post phrases. You can also develop your own statements for this exercise. If conducting this activity in person, cutout the statements on the following page and distribute them evenly to participants. Have each participant independently determine if their statement(s) are deficit- or equity-minded.

Step 2: Group Discussion

After everyone has had time to review their assigned statements, have participants take turns reading one of their statements to the group, telling the group if they believe it is equity- or deficit-minded, and why. At the end of the sharing activity, work together to reframe or rewrite the deficit-minded statements to be equity-minded.

STATEMENTS

<p>1. "I am helping my students prepare for the real world. They cannot show up late to class and expect to be successful in the real world. Actions have consequences."</p>	<p>2. "You can teach students all you want, but if they're going to choose not to learn, not to show up for class, or not to follow the rules, they aren't going to succeed no matter what the teacher does."</p>
<p>3. "I can lead a horse to water, but I cannot make it drink."</p>	<p>4. Shouldn't we really be talking about our teaching pedagogy rather than what students don't know?"</p>
<p>5. "Students aren't spending enough time outside of the classroom studying. They should expect to spend 2 hours of studying for every 1 hour in class."</p>	<p>6. "What if we experimented with some new ways to do things based on what seems to be working – and then see if the gaps close?"</p>
<p>7. "If we look at our course data, we can see which groups are struggling and then take specific steps to help them succeed."</p>	<p>8. "I treat everyone the same. There is no bias in a math equation."</p>
<p>9. "If we want to know what is going on with our students, we need to investigate questions with data. We need to find out what's happening with a particular group, no matter the size."</p>	<p>10. "Students receive limited support about career options in their first and second semesters. This may impact their retention."</p>
<p>11. "Students who are right out of high school struggle because they don't know how to be college students yet. They just aren't prepared and there's nothing I can do about that."</p>	<p>12. "Information on wraparound student support services is rarely disseminated in the classroom."</p>
<p>13. "I shouldn't have to lower my standards."</p>	<p>14. "I conducted a peer review of my colleague's History 101 course and noticed that all of the Black students sat toward the back of the room and did not engage when soliciting responses."</p>
<p>15. "We're all participating in Equity by Design to analyze our student outcomes and better understand our classroom practices – do you want to join us?"</p>	<p>16. "How can I help students who do not ask for help? I make myself available and have office hours. If students don't seek help, what am I supposed to do?"</p>

ANSWER SHEET

<p>1. "I am helping my students prepare for the real world. They cannot show up late to class and expect to be successful in the real world. Actions have consequences."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>	<p>2. "You can teach students all you want, but if they're going to choose not to learn, not to show up for class, or not to follow the rules, they aren't going to succeed no matter what the teacher does."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>
<p>3. "I can lead a horse to water, but I cannot make it drink."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>	<p>4. Shouldn't we really be talking about our teaching pedagogy rather than what students don't know?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>
<p>5. "Students aren't spending enough time outside of the classroom studying. They should expect to spend 2 hours of studying for every 1 hour in class."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>	<p>6. "What if we experimented with some new ways to do things based on what seems to be working – and then see if the gaps close?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>
<p>7. "If we look at our course data, we can see which groups are struggling and then take specific steps to help them succeed."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>	<p>8. "I treat everyone the same. There is no bias in a math equation."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>
<p>9. "If we want to know what is going on with our students, we need to investigate questions with data. We need to find out what's happening with a particular group, no matter the size."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>	<p>10. "Students receive limited support about career options in their first and second semesters. This may impact their retention."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>
<p>11. "Students who are right out of high school struggle because they don't know how to be college students yet. They just aren't prepared and there's nothing I can do about that."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>	<p>12. "Information on wraparound student support services is rarely disseminated in the classroom."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>
<p>13. "I shouldn't have to lower my standards."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>	<p>14. "I conducted a peer review of my colleague's History 101 course and noticed that all of the Black students sat toward the back of the room and did not engage when soliciting responses."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>
<p>15. "We're all participating in Equity by Design to analyze our student outcomes and better understand our classroom practices – do you want to join us?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EQUITY</p>	<p>16. "How can I help students who do not ask for help? I make myself available and have office hours. If students don't seek help, what am I supposed to do?"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEFICIT</p>

Activity: Building Common Understanding

For this exercise, members of the campus coalition will be asked to find definitions for racism, antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Definitions for each word should come from two sources: the person's existing understanding of the word and the Minnesota State Office of Equity & Inclusion's definitions. This is a foundational exercise which can be expanded upon through other activities to increase the campus coalition's understanding of equity-minded language.

Objectives:

1. To help participants build their understanding each word, to explore the intricacies and implications of different definitions for each word, and to become more comfortable discussing issues related to equity.
2. To help participants learn to appreciate the importance of language in discussing equity and social justice issues, and how the *process* of discussing the definitions adds to the understanding of the terms.
3. To create shared understanding for these terms and ensure everyone on the team is operating from the same foundational understanding.

Activity Description

Time Commitment: Up to one (1) hour

Audience: Faculty, Staff, IR/IE Practitioners, Administrators, and/or Deans

The campus team lead should divide the team into groups of 2-4 to ensure that everyone will have ample chance to participate. Each group will begin their session by having each participant share their definition for "racism". The group will proceed with the rest of the definitions attempting, if possible, to reach a consensus on one definition for each word. All definitions should be discussed. When the small groups are finished, bring everyone back together for a final discussion.

Facilitator Notes:

Preface the exercise:

There are no "right" or "wrong" answers in this exercise. People will likely have a different understanding of key concepts and terms. Remember and recognize that everyone is coming to this space with very different backgrounds and at different places in their equity journeys. It's okay if someone doesn't know how to define something. The purpose is to undergo the process of developing a common understanding.

Step 1: Participants develop their own definitions

Allow each group 10 minutes to define the following terms based on how they understand them: Racism, anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Step 2: Reflect and Share definitions

Bring the groups back together and have them reflect on this exercise. Was it challenging? Easy? What types of things arose? Did they come to a consensus on any terms?

Step 3: Review the OEI definitions for each term and discuss

Go through each of the definitions below and allow participants to reflect of their understanding of each term. Discuss the concept of power (page 10) and how that impacts diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

Minnesota State Office of Equity & Inclusion Definitions:

- **Racism:**
 - **Cultural:** Refers to representations, messages and stories conveying the idea that behaviors and values associated with white people or whiteness are automatically better or more normal than those associated with other racially defined groups.
 - **Institutional:** Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.
 - **Structural:** The normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage Whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. Structural racism encompasses the entire system of White domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics and entire social fabric. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually reproducing old and producing new forms of racism. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism – all other forms of racism emerge from structural racism.
- **Antiracism:** “A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas” (Kendi, 2019).
- **Diversity:** The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that everyone is unique and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation,

socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies.

- **Equity:** Equity is the proportional distribution of desirable outcomes across groups. Sometimes confused with equality, equity refers to outcomes, while equality connotes equal treatment. Where individuals or groups are dissimilarly situated, equal treatment may be insufficient or even detrimental to equitable outcomes. Simply put, equity connotes parity in outcomes; or, the proportional representation of historically marginalized groups in outcomes.
- **Inclusion:** Authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities and decision/policy making in a way that shares power.
 - Inclusion (campus context) - Defined as the active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity-in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect-in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions.

Understanding “Power”

When discussing any of the terms above, it is vital to bring the issue of **power** into the discussion. For example, a definition of racism might be "prejudice or discrimination based on race, plus the power to enforce it." In that case, think about who holds positions of power, how that power was derived, and in what ways that shapes one's experience. This perspective can have a major impact for individuals who may be inclined to insist that the "other" group can be just as racist as their majority group. This response provides an important opportunity to differentiate between an individual-focused basis of "racism" (which privileges the current power structure by ignoring systemic conditions) and an institutional-focused basis.

Consider spending a lot of time discussing power. Many participants (particularly those of a majority status) may have a hard time understanding it. Have the team reflect on who has power over language, the evolution of language, and how that shapes our understanding and experience. Mention how, when we don't know the meaning of a word, we go to the dictionary and accept its definition as truth. Challenge members of the team to look up dictionary definitions for "black" and "white" and notice the connotations. Talk about individual acts of racism, which may be done by anyone, as opposed to institutional acts of racism, which involves economic, class, and social factors which all result from power. Remind the team that some groups in the United States do not have the political, economic, or social power to be racist on an institutional level.