

Report of the Inclusive Excellence Advisory Committee

Spring 2026

On May 27, 2025, Chancellor Andrew D. Martin appointed a group of university leaders to an *ad hoc* committee and charged the committee with making recommendations about how best to sustain the university's longstanding commitment to maintaining an inclusive learning and work environment that is compliant with applicable civil rights laws. Washington University in St. Louis (WashU) has asserted a commitment to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for many years and has always worked to ensure that efforts to advance those principles are legally compliant. The *ad hoc* committee convened as the Inclusive Excellence Advisory Committee (the Committee) and submits the following report.

In the wake of current federal guidance emphasizing that "DEI" programs and activities must comply with civil rights laws, many in our university community have expressed interest in better understanding how they can continue pursuing university commitments to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion while complying with the relevant laws. To address the Chancellor's charge and assist the WashU community, the Committee makes the following recommendations:

1. Center four core commitments—perspectives, connections, opportunity, and culture— which are distilled from the mission, vision, and goals of WashU and can guide the work we do to foster an inclusive learning and work environment that welcomes and supports students, faculty, and staff with diverse experiences and viewpoints.
2. Establish a standing advisory board appointed by the Chancellor and comprising knowledgeable professionals to provide support and guidance to the University community in its efforts to implement the core commitments.
3. Provide ongoing guidance to University leaders about the relevant and current legal standards governing this work.
4. Share information about established evidence-based and legally compliant programs that our University community can use as springboards for discussion of new and existing programs that could flourish in their schools and departments.

Each of these recommendations is discussed in greater detail below.

Part I: Core Commitments

The Committee recommends that University leadership consider adopting the following core commitments as guideposts for our University community as we continue working to develop and sustain an inclusive learning and work environment that welcomes and supports students, faculty, and staff with diverse experiences and viewpoints. These commitments distill principles outlined in WashU's mission and vision statements and reiterated by the Chancellor and other senior leaders.

These commitments have lived in our mission and vision for decades, and many in our University community have invested time, resources, and personal capital to bring these ideas to life under many different headings and titles.

Often these efforts have been referred to by members of the WashU community as DEI efforts. The Committee recognizes that DEI is currently the topic of much discussion nationally and believes that there may be some confusion about the meaning of that term in our University community. As a result, it is important to be clear about the specific commitments underlying our work to create and sustain a welcoming and inclusive environment, and also about our steadfast commitment to always conduct that work in accordance with applicable civil rights laws.

We believe that the core commitments outlined below describe with greater clarity the purpose of the work the WashU community has done to promote an inclusive work and learning environment and can serve as useful principles as we continue this work.

OUR ONGOING COMMITMENT TO OUR MISSION

At WashU, we achieve excellence in teaching, research, and patient care through our ongoing commitment to supporting a wide variety of perspectives, community connection, access to opportunity, and a welcoming, inclusive culture.

More specifically, at WashU we achieve excellence in teaching, research, and patient care through our ongoing commitment to:

Perspectives

We welcome, support, and celebrate individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and areas of expertise because we know it takes a variety of perspectives to fuel greater knowledge, deeper understanding, and rigorous discovery.

Connections

We believe that belonging and connection are essential to allowing each of us, whether a student, trainee, faculty member, or staff member, to find and build connections to help us reach our fullest potential.

Opportunity

We offer a breadth of opportunities that recognize the strengths of all our students, trainees, faculty, and staff and support their individual paths to success.

Culture

We aim to create a welcoming, inclusive, and respectful environment for all members of our University community.

Part II: Implementation of the Core Commitments

A. FROM WORDS TO ACTION

Stating these commitments plainly and publicly helps to ensure we are aligned in our efforts to develop and sustain a welcoming and inclusive community, but it is insufficient. ***Achieving these commitments is realized when students, trainees, faculty, and staff pursue them in their day-to-day actions.***

Pursuing these commitments in day-to-day actions will require:

- Ensuring that the choices we make in our learning and work environments are consistent with the core commitments.
- Staying curious and seeking out ways to realize our commitments by working with a standing advisory board (described in greater detail below) to develop and implement programs that are both impactful and compliant.
- Working together throughout the University to collaborate on efforts to advance the core commitments and ensure we are being careful stewards of our resources.
- Always starting and ending with the University's mission and the core commitments by asking: Are we operating in accordance with those commitments? Are they being realized for all in our community?

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve these outcomes, the Committee recommends the following actions:

1. Appoint a standing advisory board of University experts and senior leaders with relevant professional expertise. Individuals whose responsibilities to the University include the creation and support of an inclusive community should be included on this advisory board.
 - The group shall be appointed by the Chancellor and shall consist of the following individuals or, where appropriate, individuals with similar professional expertise and administrative responsibilities:
 - The Associate Vice Chancellor and Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at the School of Medicine
 - The Assistant Vice Chancellor for Education and Engagement in the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor for Administration

- The Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs (with responsibility for the Center of Diversity and Inclusion (CDI))
 - The Vice Chancellor for Human Resources, or their designee
 - Faculty representative appointed by the Provost
 - Representative from the Office of the Vice Chancellor and General Counsel (OGC) as legal advisor to the group
 - The standing members of the board may, in their discretion, seek *ad hoc* support from relevant faculty, staff, or student experts in connection with specific matters under consideration.
 - The Committee recognizes that titles change over time. Where titles are used in the above list of proposed advisory board members, the key point is that participation on this advisory board should be considered an added responsibility of individuals whose professional expertise and responsibilities to the University include the creation and support of an inclusive community.
 - The advisory board shall:
 - Provide feedback and guidance on proposals relevant to the realization of our core commitments and work collaboratively to refine program proposals before they are submitted to department and/or school leadership for approval.
 - Support alignment across the institution to enhance impact, conserve resources, and limit redundancy.
 - Develop resources to support individuals, programs, departments, schools, and the University in identifying best practices to implement our commitments that are evidence-informed and compliant with the law.
 - Advise department and school leadership responsible for final approval of proposed new programs and activities regarding their efficacy and compliance.
 - Coordinate and provide consultation and training to leadership and others regarding the commitments and best practices for implementation of those commitments.
 - The advisory board will minimally require a project manager and support from IT and University Marketing & Communications to ensure timely action.
 - Each member of the advisory board will require the time to complete this work, which we believe will require weekly meetings at initiation but ultimately be determined by that body in future time periods.
2. Develop a separate process by which to audit compliance with both best practices and legal standards.

3. Help facilitate guidance provided by OGC on relevant legal standards, in written form (as appears below in Part C and as it may be updated from time to time) and through training sessions.
4. Provide examples of initiatives that are both evidence-informed and compliant with the law so that all in our University community can identify ways that they can engage actively in support of our ongoing commitment to our mission, vision, and values. Some examples are set forth in Part D below. Further examples are expected to emerge as the advisory board engages with the broader WashU community on ideas and programs put forth.

C. LEGAL GUIDANCE

Recent guidance from the federal government has focused on “diversity, equity, and inclusion” programs, including those at universities, and opined that some DEI efforts may violate certain federal civil rights laws. This guidance, and press coverage of this guidance, has generated questions about the legal constraints in this area. WashU has been and remains committed to compliance with all applicable civil rights laws and principles of equal treatment in all its programs and activities. In accordance with that commitment, OGC has prepared the following guidance to assist the University community in implementing the core commitments in a manner that is consistent with current applicable civil rights laws, regulations, and related court decisions.

Specific programs or activities often raise nuanced questions that are not addressed in this document. It will be important for program developers to consult with the advisory board (described in B above) and OGC to discuss the specific details of proposed new programming.

The Civil Rights Laws

As a recipient of federal funds, WashU is required to adhere to many laws that prohibit discrimination on specific bases, including Title VI (race, color, and national origin, which has been deemed to include shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics); Title IX (sex); and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (disability). As an employer, the University is subject to other federal and state employment discrimination laws that prohibit discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, and disability, among other protected categories. (This guidance uses the term “Protected Characteristics” to refer to these characteristics collectively.) WashU’s commitment to compliance with these civil rights laws is documented in various policies, including its [Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#).

What Do these Civil Rights Laws Prohibit?

The laws referenced above generally prohibit the University from taking Protected Characteristics into account, even as one factor among others or as a “plus factor,” in establishing and applying eligibility or selection criteria for University programs or activities. These prohibitions apply to all University policies and practices, including actions taken by

individual employees in the course and scope of their employment and actions taken by non-employee agents acting on behalf of WashU.

In accordance with these legal prohibitions, as a general matter and with a few exceptions recognized by law (such as sex-restricted athletic teams), WashU may not consider Protected Characteristics as a factor in providing or denying benefits, including but not limited to:

- Admissions, financial aid, and scholarships managed by the University;
- Conferring of awards, prizes, or other recognition;
- Hiring, promotions, or other employment actions, including the formation of hiring committees and candidate pools;
- Recruiting efforts that are limited on the basis of a Protected Characteristic (though recruiting members of identity-based groups is permissible as one part of a broad recruitment strategy aimed at achieving a wide range of applicants, provided that no benefit or consideration is given to members of the identity-based group or the group itself);
- Memberships in University groups, admittance to University programs, or attendance at University events;
- Selection, payment, and retention of vendors, consultants, contractors, or outside speakers; and
- Partnership arrangements with, or financial/operational support of, other organizations that restrict participation or opportunities based on a Protected Characteristic.

Consistent with the University's commitment to free expression and the core commitment to a variety of perspectives, the University also prohibits the use of "diversity statements" in hiring, promotion, or any other evaluation process.

Use of Non-Protected Characteristics as Eligibility or Selection Criteria

Universities are allowed to consider neutral factors that may sometimes have a statistical correlation with a Protected Characteristic, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, status as a first-generation college applicant, or geographic location, **but only if they are doing so for a neutral reason that is independent of any Protected Characteristic**. If a program or activity uses neutral factors in the implementation of a program or activity in a situation where the neutral factor may have a correlation with a Protected Characteristic, it is important to document the neutral reason for using that factor. For example, the University's "In St. Louis For St. Louis" initiative encourages us to think about ways our efforts to fulfill WashU's mission can be implemented in a manner that supports the St. Louis region. As a general rule, programs designed to further this effort are permissible, even if the majority of the persons impacted may share a Protected Characteristic. To further illustrate, an outreach program to St. Louis City schools is permissible even if the majority of the students affected by the program may be Black, **but only if** selection of participating schools is based on a neutral factor other than race.

Harassment

The civil rights laws also prohibit harassment that is based on Protected Characteristics. Harassment is unwelcome conduct based on a Protected Characteristic that is subjectively and objectively offensive, severe, or pervasive, and has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with a person's work or educational environment and creating an abusive, hostile, or threatening environment. Allegations of harassment must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

What is Permissible?

The law does not prohibit programs or activities that *address* a Protected Characteristic, **as long as access to them is not restricted on the basis of a Protected Characteristic such as race or sex**. Examples include:

- A speaker series focused on African American or Black history.
- Non-exclusive, voluntary affinity groups focused on the experiences of specific populations.
- Non-exclusive, voluntary graduation celebrations recognizing members of an affinity group that is itself open to all.
- Efforts through marketing and outreach to ensure that prospective students and employees from a wide variety of backgrounds are aware of opportunities that exist at WashU (provided that those efforts do not include the distribution of benefits on the basis of a Protected Characteristic).
- Scholarship or academic instruction regarding a Protected Characteristic, even if the professor's views are controversial or differ from those of the University administration and faculty colleagues. However, the civil rights laws and University policy prohibit discriminatory or harassing behavior on the basis of those characteristics even if that conduct occurs in an academic setting. Classroom or other academic interaction focused on Protected Characteristics that is **not** related to the subject matter of the course may be more likely to be deemed unlawful by a court of law or government regulator.

D. BEST PRACTICES TO ENSURE ALIGNMENT AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAMMING

The Committee anticipates that schools and departments will be interested in developing programming that helps support a welcoming and inclusive culture in their local University community. The Committee recognizes that good ideas about such programming can come from many different sources and that faculty, staff, and students may often have the keenest insights into what will be most impactful in their particular area. The Committee has gathered some examples of successful programming, as set forth below. We understand that these examples are not applicable to every situation nor inclusive of all the mechanisms by which we hope to support our commitments to perspectives, connections, opportunity, and culture.

However, we hope these few examples will help inform the future development or modification of such programs.

The Committee also believes that a central resource in this area is critical, as a source of expertise about effective programming, a means of fostering collaboration, an efficient use of resources, and a mechanism for ensuring legal compliance. Therefore, the Committee recommends the following process for implementation of new activities or programming in this area:

1. The individuals proposing the new activity or programming are strongly encouraged to consult with the advisory board for input as to best practices, redundancy, or opportunities for collaboration, legal compliance, etc. This is intended to be a collaborative and potentially iterative interaction designed to develop activities and programming that advance local priorities in a manner consistent with University responsibilities.
2. After incorporation of any input, the advisory board will advise the leadership of the affected school or department whether they recommend the proposed programming or activity move forward and, as applicable, offer any suggestions to enhance the activity.
3. The review will provide guidance on collaboration with similar efforts and encourage integration of evidence-informed best practices. Department or school leadership provides final approval of the new activity or programming. OGC will be available to provide guidance to the advisory board and department and school leadership.

We recommend that proponents of area-specific programming ask themselves the following questions:

- What are the anticipated impacts of this program/activity on University culture and our stated commitments? (See example below regarding Black History Month for suggestions about how programming can advance the core commitments.)
- Why should we engage in this program/activity? What do we hope it will achieve?
- Is the program consistent with legal guidance provided by OGC?
- Is the program consistent with academic freedom and free expression as outlined by the University?
- What is the potential financial and human resources impact of this program on the University, school, program, or larger community? Is it sustainable?
- What else would you need to know about this activity/program to answer these questions? Who should you consult to assist you in answering these questions?

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT OUR COMMITMENTS

Professional Development: The medical school offers professional development programming to our internal and external community in the areas of health disparities and cultural competency to serve our patient population (e.g., perinatal race-based health disparities). This programming supports excellence in evidence-based, patient-centered care and the commitment to valuing varied perspectives.

Admissions/Recruitment: Several graduate programs routinely send a contingent of faculty and students to the American Society for Microbiology's Conference for Multidisciplinary Science in an effort to recruit a diverse applicant pool to apply to the program. The conference is open to all students, regardless of race or other Protected Characteristics, and provides opportunities for students to present their work, go to career/networking/skills workshops, and explore graduate programs from a variety of institutions. Program attendance provides no benefit in the admissions process. Program representatives bring brochures and low-cost promotional items such as buttons and lanyards as giveaways. They attend this event as part of a comprehensive recruitment strategy that includes multiple events and recruitment modalities using similar low-cost items. This event supports the commitment of opportunity.

Pathway Programming: A department in the School of Medicine seeks to train a cohort of individuals to provide culturally responsive care for the under-resourced population that it serves. It provides scholarships to medical students from other medical schools who wish to do a visiting rotation in their specialty and who are committed to promoting health equity and providing care to marginalized populations. The application requires an essay, CV, and letters of recommendation. The \$2,000 scholarship is to offset the costs of travel, housing, and living expenses while on rotation. Protected Characteristics are not obtained or considered as part of the application process. This programming supports the commitments of perspectives and opportunity.

STUDENT AFFAIRS EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT OUR COMMITMENTS

Example 1: Black History Month Day Trip to Memphis – National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel	
Learning Objective	WashU students will engage with the history and legacy of the civil rights movement by participating in an immersive educational trip to Memphis. All students are eligible for participation regardless of background. This experience will be designed to highlight the importance of diverse perspectives, building connections, seizing opportunities, and cultivating a culture of inclusiveness and respect.
Perspectives	Recognize and articulate the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and expertise of key figures and participants in the civil rights movement, understanding how these varied perspectives contributed to the movement's success and to greater social progress.
Connections	Identify and evaluate the interpersonal and community connections that were essential to the effectiveness of civil rights activities and draw parallels to the importance of belonging and connection within their own academic and professional environments.
Opportunities	Assess the historical opportunities that arose from the civil rights movement's accomplishments and explore contemporary opportunities for advocacy and social justice within their own spheres of influence.
Culture	Reflect on the significance of creating and maintaining a welcoming, inclusive, and respectful environment in their communities. Develop strategies to foster such a culture in their academic, professional, and personal lives based on insights gained from the movement's successes and challenges.

Example 2: Black History Month CDI Book Club Reading and Q&A with visiting poet	
Learning Objective	Students will analyze and articulate themes of identity, resilience, and social justice as represented in the poet’s work. They will engage in meaningful dialogue that fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of different perspectives and cultural narratives. Additionally, students will gain insight into the creative process and the role of poetry as tools to reflect on and incorporate into their personal and academic growth. All students are eligible for participation regardless of background.
Perspectives	Identify and appreciate the diverse perspectives presented in the poetry, reflect on how students’ own viewpoints shape interpretation and engagement with literature and societal issues, and actively participate in critical discussions that foster empathy and respect for different perspectives—supporting their growth as well-rounded individuals and scholars.
Connections	Engage in dialogue during Q&A to build meaningful connections across diverse perspectives and experiences, identify shared themes of humanity and resilience in poetry that foster empathy and solidarity, and develop strategies for sustaining inclusive literary communities that affirm belonging and mutual respect.
Opportunities	Gain insight into creative processes and career pathways through direct interaction with the poet, identify opportunities to use literature and poetry as tools for advocacy and social change within their academic or professional contexts, and develop confidence in engaging with complex cultural texts to enhance critical thinking and communication skills.
Culture	Demonstrate respect for the cultural significance of the poet’s work by acknowledging its roots in diverse traditions, practice inclusive dialogue norms during discussions and Q&A to ensure all voices are heard and valued, and commit to fostering a culture that celebrates diversity while understanding the ethical responsibility of engaging with multiple narratives.

Example 3: Women's History Month A Look Back on WashU Women's Athletics	
Learning Objective	The WashU community will gain an understanding and appreciation of the historical contributions and achievements of women in sports at WashU, recognizing the impact of these milestones on gender equity in athletics and their inspirational role in the ongoing pursuit of excellence and inclusion in sports.
Perspectives	Explore the range of experiences and challenges faced by women athletes at WashU over the years, understanding how they overcame barriers to achieve success.
Connections	Connect the historical achievements of women's athletic teams at WashU with broader movements toward gender equity and women's empowerment in sports, recognizing the University's role in promoting these values.
Opportunities	Identify the opportunities created by the successes of WashU women's sports teams for future female athletes, noting how these achievements have paved the way for increased participation and support for women in athletics.
Culture	Students will appreciate the cultural significance of women's sports at WashU, understanding how the achievements of female athletes have contributed to a culture of excellence, inclusion, and respect for schola-champions within the University's athletic community.

Example 4: Disability Awareness Month Disability Employment Awareness Panel	
Learning Objective	By participating in the panel discussion, participants will gain comprehensive insights and practical strategies to support and promote access, opportunity, and inclusion for individuals with disabilities in the workplace.
Perspectives	Deepen understandings of the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in the workplace by listening to the panelists' personal stories and professional insights.
Connections	Build meaningful connections with peers, faculty, and panelists, who share learning interests or importance of shared understanding of creating more inclusive spaces for individuals with disabilities.
Opportunities	Explore opportunities for improving access and support for people with disabilities in professional settings, identifying actionable steps they can take to advocate for and implement inclusive workplace practices.
Culture	Through discussions and reflections, participants will gain an appreciation for the importance of fostering a workplace culture that values and supports equal treatment, creating a more respectful and welcoming environment for all employees.