

2021 Weldon School Town Hall Report

Summary

The October 29, 2021 All School Town Hall meeting addressed the 2021 Climate Survey which was completed by over 200 members of the Weldon School community. Approximately 62 individuals attended the town hall. Dr Christopher Munt opened with a group discussion on belonging and inclusion. The DEI Steering Committee introduced a Conflict Resolution Flow Chart which was met with mixed reviews. Dr. Umulis announced a plan to reach \$28,000 minimum pay for BME students which has now been met for all BME research assistantships. Dr. Hugh Lee encouraged each person to initiate events to increase belonging within and across labs. Dr Michael Heinz shared goals for improved graduate student support through the academic milestones and policies. Our goal is that this 90-minute meeting will be only the start of discussing and resolving issues around belonging, inclusion, equity and diversity. These are complex problems and there are a number of new, and expanded, efforts in the Weldon School in response to the priorities developed from the Climate Survey and Town Hall. Specific efforts and activities are listed at the end of this document under *“Activities and DEI-focused efforts with regards to Priorities”*.

Introduction

On October 26th the Weldon School held a Town Hall from 1-2:30pm to discuss the outcomes of the 2021 Weldon School Diversity and Equity Climate Survey. All members of the Weldon School were invited to attend the town hall and could join in person or via zoom. This report is an overview of the outcomes of the town hall and those attendees who expressed their views on Diversity Equity and Inclusion within the Weldon School.

The 2021 Climate Survey had responses from over 200 members (33%) of the Weldon School community and many areas of strength within the school were identified as well as priority areas to further improve the culture and climate of the school. The Town Hall was facilitated by Dr. Christopher Munt, the Director of Inclusive Excellence at the University's Division of Diversity and Inclusion, and allowed participants to discuss the Climate Survey outcomes, learn from each other's lived experiences, and provide brave and respectful conversation and engagement around ongoing efforts to address disparities within the school. Following the Town Hall, the DEI Steering Committee, along with Dr. Munt, and Dr. David Umulis, the head of the Weldon School, analyzed notes from the main discussion, sought feedback via an anonymous Qualtrics survey, and held discussions with attendees as well as those who were unable to attend. This report reflects the broad areas, conversation, discussion, and learnings from the Town Hall compiled by Dr. Jacqueline Linnes, the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Weldon School and edited by DEI Steering Committee members.

Approximately 37 individuals attended in-person and 25 attended via Zoom.

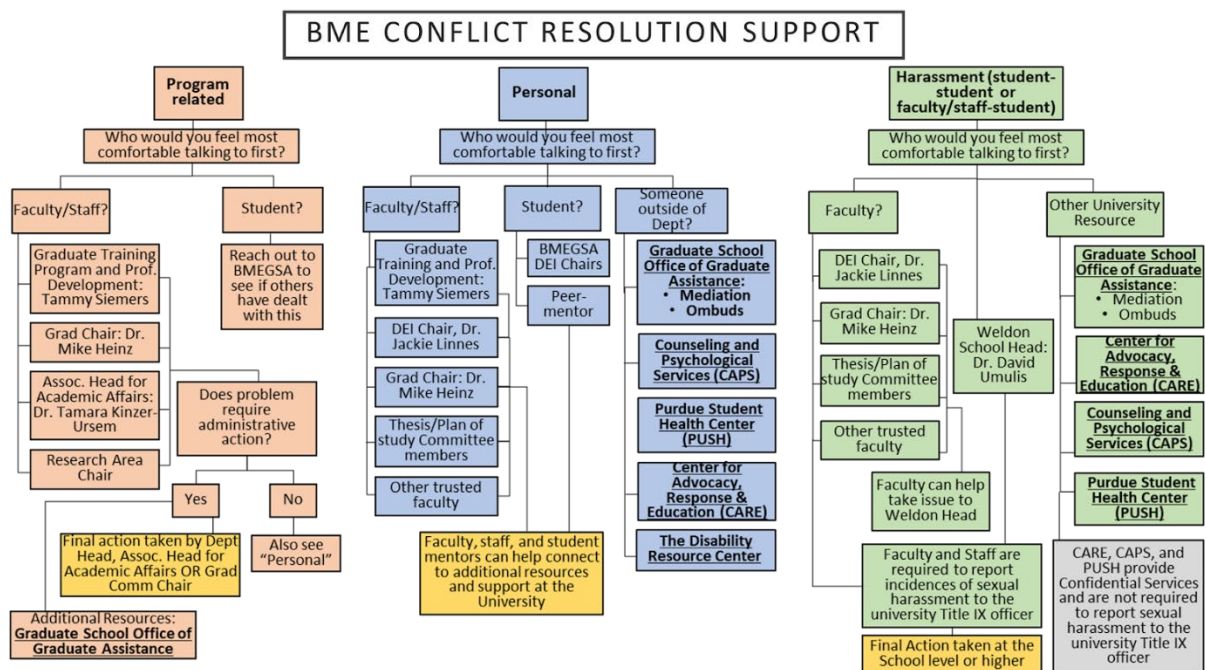
The Format of the event was as follows

Welcome and Introduction	Explanation of Agenda, Engagement rules
Overview of Climate Survey Data	Areas of strength, growth and challenges within the Weldon School

Conflict Resolution and Reporting	Steps for reporting discrimination/harassment. Introduction of Conflict Resolution Flow Chart
Priorities	Reporting of DEI Priority areas within the Weldon School
Large Group Activity	Feedback and thoughts on the Climate Survey results
Small Group Discussion	Small Group Introductions, discussions of belonging, experiences around inclusion, and increasing these
Large Group Question and Answer	Discussion of concerns brought up through the anonymous survey
Closing statements	Synthesis of discussion

Dr. Umulis and Dr. Munt introduced the Town Hall and laid **rules of engagement** including approaching conversations with respect, empathy, and willingness to learn. Slides over Key Climate Survey Outcomes were presented as was a new Conflict Resolution Flow Chart designed to aid the Weldon Community in seeking assistance for support. The initial chart was designed at the graduate students level, though future undergraduate, faculty, and staff flow charts are also in development.

A new **Conflict Resolution flow chart** that focused on graduate students was presented and met with mixed reviews:



<https://engineering.purdue.edu/BME/AboutUs/DiversityEquityInclusion/grad-conflict-resolution>

There was appreciation for the increased transparency in proactive approaches to conflict resolution at early stages, but graduate students also expressed concern that the flow chart may only be used as a checkbox to protect faculty and administrators. Undergraduates expressed desire for their own chart to guide their conflict resolution. Additionally, students may find it hard to bring up concerns to the individuals listed on the flow chart if they have not previously been introduced to these members. Further, both a desire for public accountability and a need to

bring up concerns confidentially and without potential for repercussions were expressed. The leadership within the Weldon School is working to balance both of these important desires, as well as legal Title IX reporting requirements in order to be responsive to concerns brought forward.

A list of **Priorities**, stemming from the Climate Survey was presented as well. Feedback in the town hall included desire to learn more about and discuss the specific actions rather than overall vision. The current actions within these priorities are listed at the end of this document.

Following this presentation, **Dr. Munt** led a small group introduction and discussion around themes of **belonging and inclusion and means of achieving these**. While the community was hesitant at first to engage in discussions, starting with positive aspects and experiences eased the transition to trusting one another and being able to share suggestions and more personal stories. These are only initial discussions on belonging and inclusion for all, and more discussion and action are warranted to achieve these. The group then discussed anonymous Qualtrics survey questions submitted by members of the Weldon School.

Questions

Questions posed by attendees expressed frustration with the status quo, concerns about potential for repercussions against those who bring up concerns and disempowerment.

Questions addressed included:

- Concerns with graduate pay equity:
Dr. Umulis described a goal to improve the pay gap and commitment to a target of **\$28,000 minimum pay for BME students**.
 - Major change to the existing pay structure and buy-in from all faculty training BME graduate students were required to achieve this ambitious goal. This goal was achieved by the end of 2021, and 100% of all BME Research Assistants are all now paid at this minimum salary.
- Question about how issues of conflict, discrimination or harassment within the department for other groups in addition to graduate students:
Flow charts are being developed **for all groups** to have a starting point for resolution and anyone can also report issues to the Dean's office as well.
- Question about repercussions against those that didn't agree with DEI efforts (the anonymous question was vague about specific activities):
Clarification was sought but not completely determined during the meeting. Discussion therefore focused on the **importance of accountability and shared common agenda** even when community members may disagree on specific activities to best achieve the shared goals.
- Question about how to foster **belonging within lab groups**:
Anyone can be the catalyst for this, and students and faculty don't have to wait for others to take the lead. **Dr. Hugh Lee** gave an example of his story of initiating faculty happy hours when he desired more connection with his colleagues in his very first years as a new assistant professor in BME. We can **each be the individual who proposes social activities**, and provides inclusion and emotional support to our colleagues.
- Questions about how inclusion will be built into department graduate programs:
Dr. Michael Heinz, director of Graduate Curriculum in BME shared that the graduate curriculum is undergoing changes to improve support systems through the academic milestones and policies. **Development of a systemic and cohort based approach to the graduate curriculum** is planned by the end of February 2022.

With **only 1.5 hours, not every question was able to be addressed fully** and more discussion was both desired and needed. Ultimately, we hope to empower community members so that anonymous questions are not required and everyone will feel welcome to discuss concerns and suggestions for changes. This requires **building trust** within the department and a long-term commitment to taking concerns seriously and making needed changes. It is important to note that the Town Hall was only a first step in this process.

Closing Comments

Closing Comments Following a presentation of the slides provided to the Weldon School. Dr. Munt acknowledged that many of the concerns brought up in the Climate Survey are complex challenges without easy solutions. Issues faced within the BME department are reflected nationally and in other schools within Purdue as well. This is not an abdication of duty to solve them, simply an acknowledgement that there are no easy solutions. The DEI steering Committee and The Weldon School have initiated a **number of new, and expanded current efforts, in response to the priorities developed from the Climate Survey and Town Hall**. These are presented below and we are looking forward to discussing and developing other steps that the Weldon School Community identifies too.

Learnings for future town halls:

As the first of our in-person town halls, we gained many insights and suggestions for future improvements in the process. Following the Town Hall, both undergraduates and staff members expressed feeling overlooked and even excluded during the event itself, due to challenges that included not knowing about the All-School purpose prior to the meeting, being unable to attend due to scheduling, or not feeling a place within the Weldon School's missions. These groups want to be more included in activities across the school. **Spring Open Forums** are being designed to engage more specific groups within the community in smaller discussions of specific needs and the ongoing activities designed for Undergraduates, Graduates, Staff and inclusion across these groups. The DEI steering committee also plans to increase awareness and invitations to next fall's All-School Town Hall so that all members of the community can be better informed and engaged in the activities.

As we hold future Open Forums and Town Halls, we plan to reduce the introductory sections to allow for more discussion time. The Weldon School now has weekly **Round Table Newsletters** to present DEI activities, updates, and highlights. We will also change the moderation so that the virtual attendees are more connected and have a virtual moderator to lead breakouts online as well as in person. We hope that these serve as safe spaces for brave discussions that create a shared learning experience.

Activities and DEI-focused efforts with regards to Climate Survey Priorities

A number of identified areas in the Town Hall where additional support is needed for our community.

All Weldon Community

In order to increase community across groups in the Weldon School, the DEI Committee helped to develop and catalyze School-level initiatives including the first **Annual Art of Research Showcase** during the Advisory Board meeting in September, **the All-School Ice Cream Social** in August, upcoming **Coffee-chats with Faculty** in Spring 2022.

Staff

Dr. Umulis has initiated a **staff Appreciation celebration** which will coincide with National Staff Appreciation Day on March 4th. Additionally, BME staff are exceptional and have won numerous awards for their efforts including in Fall 2021: William Schoenlein received the Leah H. Jamieson Leadership Award, Karin Ejendal the College of Engineering Research Staff Excellence Award, Cynthia Holderbaum the 2021 Eudoxia Girard Martin Memorial Staff Recognition Award. The Weldon School is recommitting to celebrating the achievements and appreciation of our BME staff.

Postdoctoral Fellows

BME has started the **Biomedical Engineering Research Associates Group (BRAG)** led by Senior Research Scientist, Dr. Karin Ejendal, to support our growing postdoc and research scientist community and to foster professional development. Activities include seminars and workshops for Writing research grants and fellowships, job search resources, and research sounding boards.

Graduate Students

The graduate program is currently undergoing significant updates to increase community, support, and mentoring. On this note, we have expanded the **Graduate Peer Mentoring Program** initiated by the DEI steering committee with BME Graduate Student Association and Tammy Siemers, the Weldon School's Senior Graduate Training Program and Professional Development Specialist. This fall, all first-year graduate students have been matched with mentors so that they can learn the inner-workings of graduate school from more senior peers who have had the same recent struggles and hold critical insights to successes. Postdocs too have the opportunity to be both mentors and mentees within this program.

The Weldon School was able to quickly implement more **equitable pay for BME research assistants** at a minimum pay of \$28,000/year starting January 1, 2022. Teaching assistantships and fellowships controlled outside of BME are also under negotiation in order to ensure that all BME students receive at least this minimum.

The BME DEI Steering Committee is also working with the BME GSA to build a **library of resources** about diversity, equity, and inclusion and uncovering the "hidden curriculum" of academia.

Undergraduate students

In the Climate Survey and Town Hall, undergraduate students in particular expressed concern with the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in BME and a desire to increase representation within the department. Towards this end, the DEI Steering Committee initiated a **High School Internship Program** Summer 2021, to improve underrepresented and underserved student engagement and awareness of BME as a discipline and increase the pipeline of undergraduate students interested in BME. Seven students from McCutcheon High School in Tippecanoe County, Lafayette Jefferson High school, and Purdue Polytechnic in Indianapolis completed 8-week research internships in faculty labs. This program is continuing in Summer 2022 and we hope to expand to a residential program with more funding in the future years.

We have also worked closely with the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee to expand the **undergraduate resource center** to 3-4 nights/week, coordinated by a 25% Graduate Teaching Assistant. Requests for additional support are welcome.

Faculty

By making BME Administration aware of the lack of award and leadership opportunities for women and people of color pointed out in the climate survey, Dr. Umulis has committed to **making intentional efforts to be more inclusive, equitable, and transparent** in these decisions.

DEI Steering Committee members have further catalyzed the integration of other best practices within the department as well, including developing and formalizing **holistic faculty hiring rubrics** that are now being used in the 3 ongoing faculty searches with the School. These rubrics include calibrated criteria pertaining to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility as well as Research Productivity, Scholarly Impact, Engineering teaching, Funding and Research Administration, Collaboration and Leadership, Service and Community Engagement, and Trainee and Peer Mentorship.

DEI Steering Committee Led Efforts

The DEI Steering Committee continues to collect, analyze and report school-level diversity representation data in a **Diversity Index Report** and school-wide **Diversity and Equity Climate Surveys** to implement continuous improvement and evaluate the impact of these activities and initiatives.

DEI Steering committee members and Weldon faculty continue to lead and participate in recruiting and engagement activities for underrepresented groups this fall including the [Big10 Graduate School Expo](#), [Graduate Diversity Visitation Program](#), and [Trailblazers in Engineering](#), as well as further engaging with University-led recruiting events at [SACNAS National Diversity in STEM Conference](#) and [Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students \(ABRCMS\)](#), and facilitating small groups at the College of Engineering DEI Workshop (this training is required for all incoming faculty and staff). Other faculty, staff, and students are encouraged to join outreach and recruiting activities to promote diversity and inclusion within the department.

Within the department, the DEI Steering Committee leads **journal clubs** for Faculty and Staff, and Graduate student/Faculty/Staff (co-led by with BME GSA) to provide safe spaces for discussion, education and learning about wide ranging diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) higher education. These have included: rural exclusion in STEM, classroom and conference accessibility, LGBTQ+ visibility, and the use of active-learning to empower underrepresented students in the classroom. Encouragingly, these grass roots journal club initiatives stemmed from faculty, staff, and graduate students who saw the need to educate themselves and were empowered to start these conversations and include their peers. Undergraduates also expressed desire for similar journal clubs with faculty engagement, and DEI Steering Committee members can provide support and encourage faculty to attend these undergraduate-led initiatives as well.

Activities and Priorities to Improve Diversity

Of note, Weldon School activities and priorities to improve diversity, though not the focus of the Town Hall discussion, remain critical aspects of DEI efforts and are integrated into activities ranging from the holistic faculty hiring rubrics, outreach and recruiting from minority-serving institutions and societies, the high school outreach and internship program focus on underrepresented students, and accountability in measuring and reporting Weldon School demographics through the Diversity Index Report.

2021-2022 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Steering Committee Members:

Jacqueline Linnes (Chair)
Claudia Benito Alston (BMEGSA Representative)
Douglas Brubaker
Deva Chan
Angel Enriquez (BMEGSA Representative)
Krishna Jayant
Katherine Kerr (BMES representative 2021)
Nan Kong
Hugh Lee
Corey Linkel (Staff Liaison)
Elsje Pienaar
Luis Solorio
Max Gieseemann (BMES representative 2022)
Yunjie Tong

Thanks to all those who provided and their questions and discussions before, during, and after the Town Hall as well as their detailed feedback and insights. Special thanks to Ms. Lucy Tecle for taking notes during the event.