Moving Beyond Diversity to *Inclusion*

DEI in Action at College Track

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PROMISE 54

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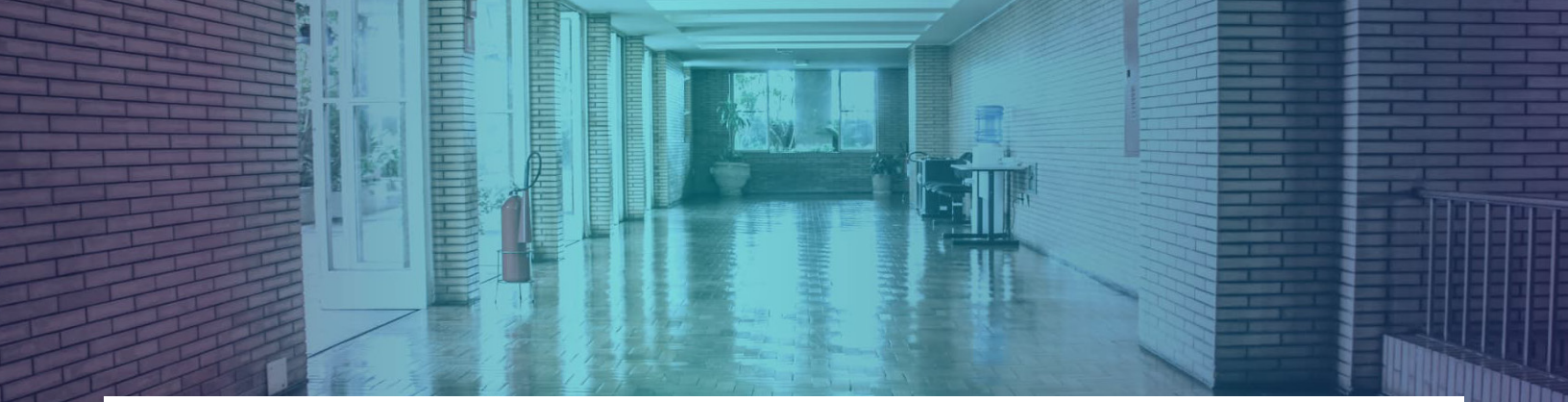

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Introduction

You've probably seen those case studies — the ones that all too often gloss over thorny, multidimensional challenges and deeply human imperfections for the sake of a neat narrative or sales pitch.

These are not the case studies you're used to.

Since the release of "*Unrealized Impact*" — Promise54's first-of-its-kind, rigorous effort to quantify the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the field — we've received many requests for narratives sharing organizations' actual DEI journeys. In response, we've written this series of in-depth case studies that reflect the messy reality of the work to create thriving environments for adults so they can do their best work on behalf of students, families, and communities.

We've endeavored to create a radically human alternative to the run-of-the-mill case study. Based on hours of interviews and analyses of artifacts, staff experience survey data, and DEI plans, we strove to honestly represent the journey of each organization featured — including progress made, comparisons to sector benchmarks, missteps along the way, and the challenges that these organizations are still grappling with today.

We also recognize that the stories we share are not fully representative of the wide range of perspectives and experiences that exist within these organizations. Bias is inherent in any research endeavor, and we acknowledge that there are likely biases and dominant perspectives built into ours.

This honest and radically human representation requires an immense amount of vulnerability and bravery from the participating organizations. They have invited us into not only their moments of success but also their messiest, most difficult moments.

The organizations you'll read about here are not groups who have "arrived," and we're not holding them up as models of perfection for others to emulate. We believe perfection is an impossibility — and the

focus on it is often a manifestation of white-dominant culture in our organizations. Instead, we embrace imperfection as a part of being human.

What's more, DEI work simply can't be automated. There's no universal checklist to follow — not even in these case studies — and no one-size-fits-all formula for how to get to diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Each organization's path is highly specific to its own culture, beliefs, and challenges. DEI work within organizations is a winding process that requires maintenance, patience, and tailoring.

That's why we're shining a spotlight on organizations of different sizes, types, and geographies, and at different points in their journey. The first three featured organizations in this series model courage, candor, and vulnerability by baring their often uncomfortable truths.

And therein lies the essence of the work itself.

For live updates and interactive field-wide data, visit casestudies.promise54.org

Understanding Our Data

How do we measure, compare, and classify organizations on diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Throughout the case studies, you will see references to Promise54's DEI surveys, our aggregate field-level DEI data, and our "Unrealized Impact" report. Here's a bit more information on how we use those tools to help organizations measure, benchmark, and classify DEI efforts.

Measure

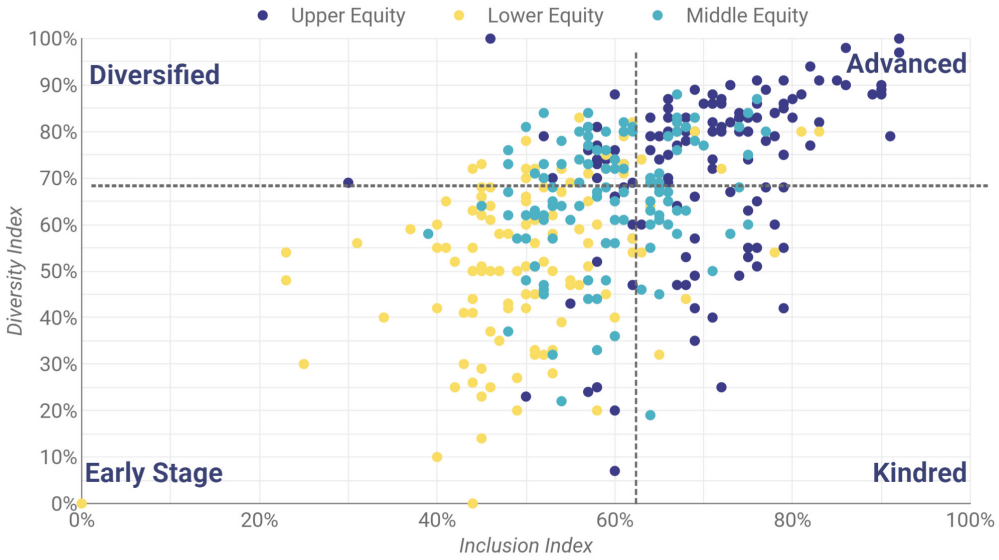
In spite of a desire to drive progress related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, we see many organizational leaders struggle to measure and monitor their efforts over time. In our Promise54 DEI surveys and associated reports, we offer a solution: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Indices. These indices offer an aggregate look across a battery of questions on staff perspectives for each distinct DEI concept. Many organizations find the Diversity Index, Equity Index, and Inclusion Index to be powerful metrics to watch as they seek to monitor the effectiveness of their DEI work over time while using our more detailed reporting on each index to inform their plans for the future.

Compare

While each organization's DEI journey is distinct, leaders and staff alike can find it informative to understand how their organization's current state compares to those of their peers. Therefore, we continue to collect and report on aggregate field-level DEI data over time. Our repository of DEI data is always growing, but at the time of these case studies, our benchmarks include 20,000 respondents across 400 organizations, largely in the field of education. Our benchmarks span all 50 states of the U.S. and the District of Columbia, include organization sizes from no full-time staff to several thousand, and represent various types of education organizations.

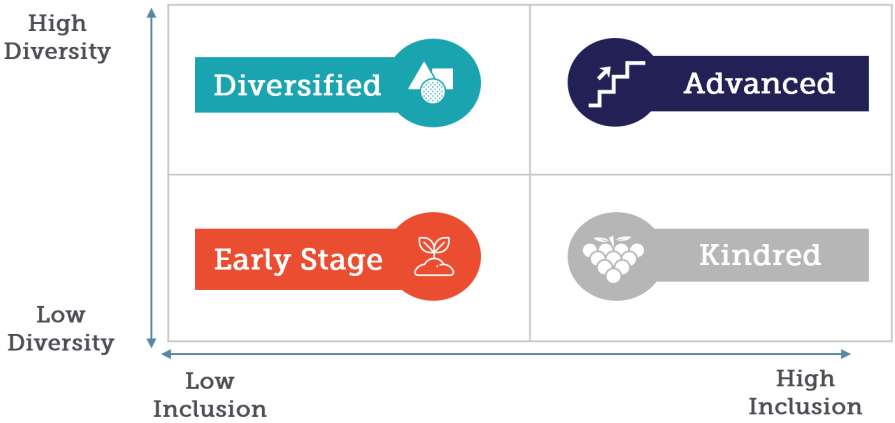
Classify

As we looked across all three dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion for organizations that have participated in the Promise54 Staff Experience DEI Survey, we noted substantial similarities among clusters of organizations (as illustrated in the scatterplot below):



Based on these common characteristics, we created Organizational Profiles to describe organizations in a similar place in relation to DEI. Leaders often find Organizational Profiles useful to contextualize their experiences and to get a sense, across all three dimensions, of their organization's past, present, and future state/journey.

In brief, the Organizational Profiles based on Promise54 DEI Staff Experience Survey data are:



PROFILE: EARLY STAGE ORGANIZATION

Early Stage organizations typically have relatively:

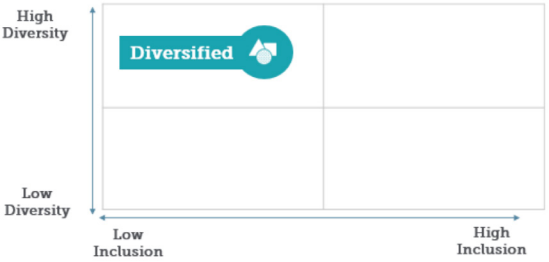
- Low staff and leadership demographic diversity
- Low staff experiences of inclusion
- Low staff experiences of equity
- High reports of bias being witnessed and experienced
- Low Net Promoter Scores
- Low staff intent to stay

Our data indicates that this pattern could be driven by a couple of conditions (or a combination of them): 1) good intentions coupled with low or inconsistent prioritization of DEI efforts, 2) a need for a clear articulation of the link between DEI and the organization's mission, and 3) an understanding of which DEI-related strategies will prove to be high leverage within the organizational context.

PROFILE: DIVERSIFIED ORGANIZATION

Diversified organizations typically have relatively:

- High staff and leadership demographic diversity
- Low staff experiences of inclusion
- Low staff experiences of equity
- High reports of bias being witnessed and experienced
- Low Net Promoter Scores
- Low staff intent to stay



Our data indicates that this pattern could be driven by an expectation that staff and leaders of color will assimilate to preexisting culture, practices, and systems versus an organization identifying and making the necessary changes to effectively receive and support a more diverse staff so they can thrive. Alternatively, some Diversified organizations may expect, whether implicitly or explicitly, that inclusion and equity will automatically follow from diversity. The underlying assumption is that staff who "represent" the communities served will drive forward this progress, and thus they are seen as responsible for the work rather than sharing the responsibility and the burden of the work across an organization.

PROFILE: KINDRED ORGANIZATION

Kindred organizations typically have relatively:

- Low staff and leadership demographic diversity
- High staff experiences of inclusion
- High staff experiences of equity
- Low reports of bias being witnessed and experienced
- High Net Promoter Scores
- High staff intent to stay

While inclusive and equitable, these organizations are not diverse and may be experienced as inclusive or equitable because they're homogeneous. Additionally, our data indicates that these organizations may not be generating the myriad benefits that studies demonstrate result from diversity.

PROFILE: ADVANCED ORGANIZATION

Advanced organizations typically have relatively:

- High staff and leadership demographic diversity
- High staff experiences of inclusion
- High staff experiences of equity
- Low reports of bias being witnessed and experienced
- High Net Promoter Scores
- High staff intent to stay

Our data indicates that many Advanced organizations have organically integrated DEI into their fabric without articulating, documenting, or codifying their approaches, beliefs, or practices. This can expose these organizations to risks of not being able to sustain their strong DEI in periods of uncertainty or during substantial organizational inflection points.

Who They Are

After working with College Track over the past few years, we invited the organization to participate in this case study because we wanted the field to see an example of what getting to diversity has looked like for a large — and growing! — leading education organization. Today, CEO Elissa Salas is at the helm as College Track navigates the challenges of moving beyond diversity to inclusion and equity while they scale up nationally. Here's what we heard.

Mission

"College Track is a comprehensive college completion program that empowers students from underserved communities to graduate from college." Starting in 9th grade, College Track's 10-year commitment to each student in their program is to "remove the academic, financial, and social-emotional barriers that prevent low-income and first-generation students from earning a four-year degree."

Vision

"We are working toward a world where our students reach beyond the limits of what we knew was possible. We've only just begun to scratch the surface of understanding the full potential of what our college graduates can achieve."

THEMES

The need to sustain diversity, broadeniing narrow standards of excellence, communicating through layers and growth, and developing shared definitions of DEI.

ORGANIZATION SIZE

Medium to large — 140 staff

LOCATION

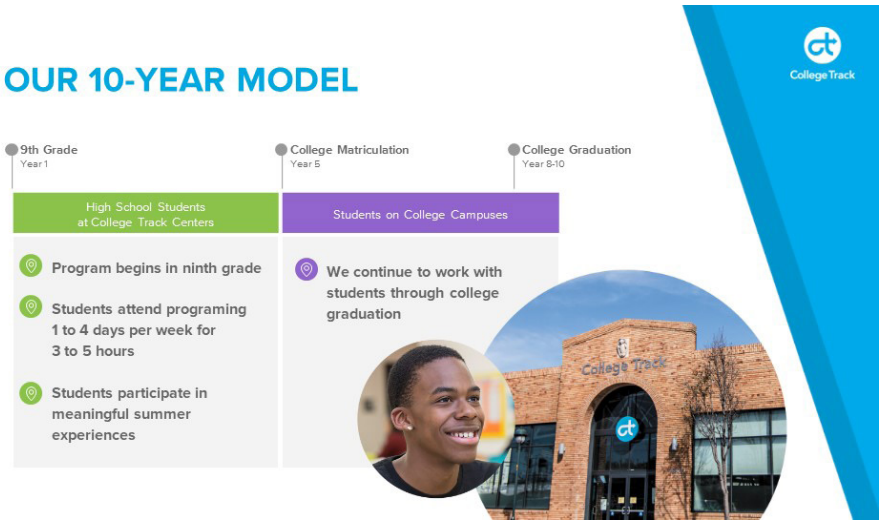
California (headquarters), Colorado, Louisiana, Maryland, and District of Columbia

History

Before Laurene Powell Jobs was a philanthropist, she was a grad student who was invited, with her classmate Carlos Watson, to present at a 12th-grade college prep class at Carlmont High School in East Palo Alto. The pair found that many students they spoke with were hoping to be the first in their families to attend college, but few had met the minimum requirements to be eligible. After that visit, Jobs, Watson, and Carlmont Principal Debbra Lindo joined to imagine what a comprehensive college access program could look like. Their priority was starting earlier in high school to help put students "on track" for a bachelor's degree. College Track was born in 1997.

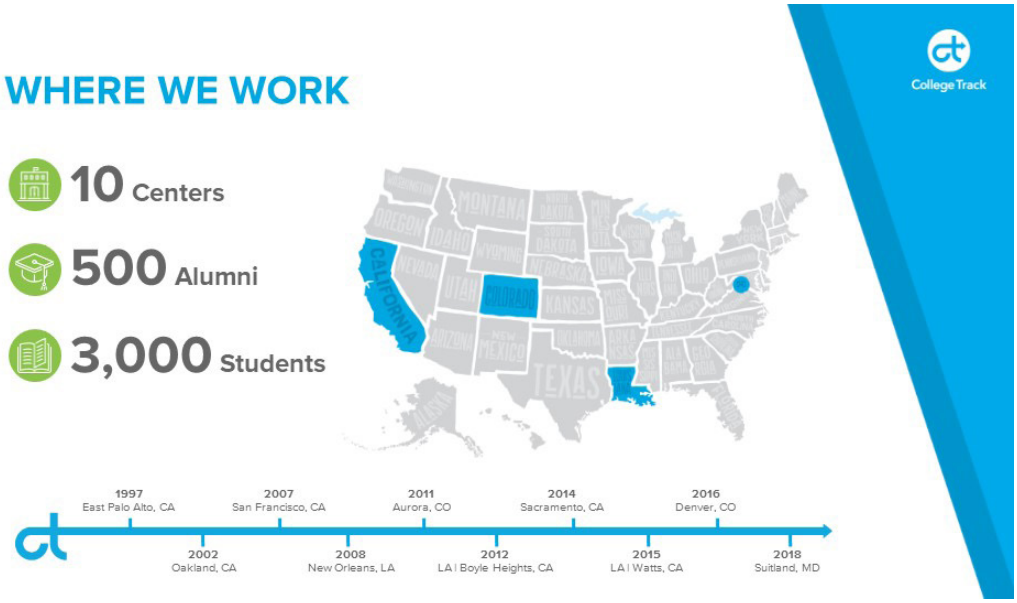
Approach

College Track engages a "holistic program model" that "ensures that students have the skills, resources, and mindsets they need to be competitive college applicants, thrive on a four-year campus, and experience professional success post-graduation."



Impact

College Track students graduate from college at a rate more than double the national average for low-income and first-generation students. Five hundred college graduates have gone through College Track and are now out in the world on career paths.



Timeline


1997
Founded in 1997 in East Palo Alto at Carlmont High School
2002
Oakland, CA
2007
San Francisco, CA
2008
New Orleans, LA
2011
Aurora, CO
2012
Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, CA
2014
Sacramento, CA
2015
Watts, Los Angeles, CA
2016
Denver, CO
2018
Prince Georges County, MD
2019
DC (Ward 8)
2020
To open in South Los Angeles, at the invitation of Leonard Hill Trust, Crenshaw HS and Dorsey HS for a total of 12 sites

Where They're Coming From

In over 20 years at College Track, Marshall Lott has served in multiple roles — from being the very first hire to holding operations roles to most recently serving as Senior Regional Partnerships Director. Marshall reflects on his first role — College Track's founding Executive Director — and tells us about the organization's diverse roots: "[The founders] hired [me], an African American middle-class person to take the concept from paper and...make it a reality. It started with the Black and Latino community."

From the beginning, College Track has strived to be a racially diverse organization that implicitly holds representation as a core — though, at times, unspoken — priority. Representation, leaders and staff believe, connects deeply to the team's long-standing value around authenticity. Marshall emphasizes the organization's intentions to truly reflect local communities:

> *"We have tried to make sure that individuals [who] are leading the sites live near or live in the community. Someone [who] looks like them helps to an extent...it's about how people connect to individuals based on care [and] concern, and it's about their potential."*

Elissa Salas, College Track's current CEO, expands:

> *"[The] most important thing is that we have always had people of color in leadership except [for] four years [in our history].... The founders have always been very committed to authenticity and [staff] having a similar experience and identity to the people we serve."*

VALUING DIVERSITY

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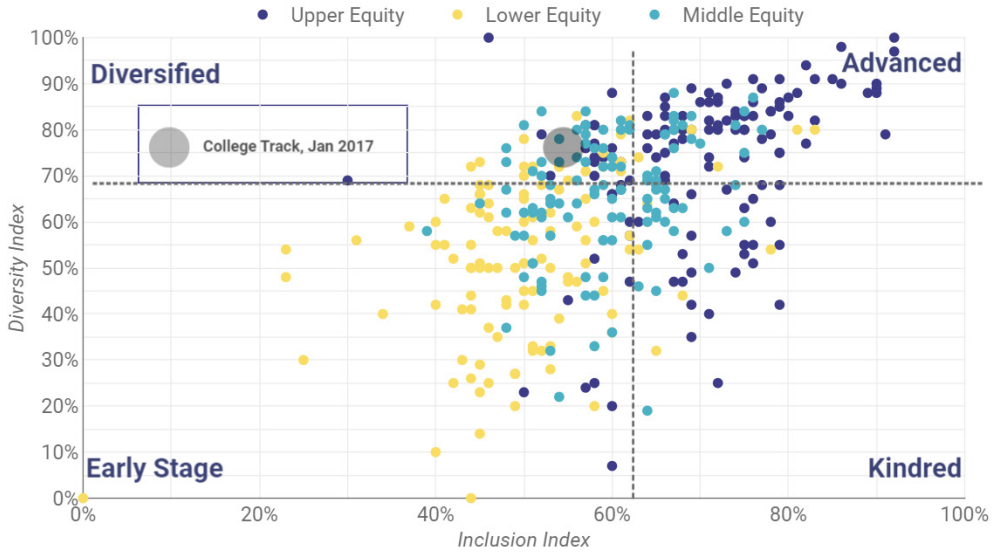
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

To what degree do you agree with the association between representative demographics and authenticity in relation to your organization and its work? Why, and what are the implications?

In the earliest days, relatively small teams who represented local communities grew close-knit organically through intense work and a shared commitment to College Track's mission. The East Palo Alto, CA, and Oakland, CA, teams each spent four years building cultures of connection before the San Francisco, CA, and New Orleans, LA,teams launched in consecutive years. With relationships to community and to one another informally embedded, College Track grew at a relatively slow pace, expanding to four sites in its first 13 years.

Beginning in 2011, however, College Track grew more aggressively, more than doubling in size by expanding to an additional five sites in the next seven years. The organization that once felt small, intimate, and local was getting consistently more dispersed and complex. The team had expanded from a few California sites and one Louisiana site to multiple regions spanning California, Colorado, Louisiana, and Maryland. To accommodate the growth, the organization added new layers of leadership and new reporting structures. The original commitment to diversity, ingrained organically at the College Track of 1997, was being increasingly stretched at the larger, more complex organization of 2017.

Twenty years after the organization's founding, as College Track's leadership and board worked to tackle the organizational, structural, and relational demands of expansion, they also maintained a driving interest in diversity, inclusion, and equity (DEI). The organization began codifying some of the informal cultural norms that had once evolved organically, in the interest of ensuring a sustainable, values-aligned growth model. To collect baseline data in 2017, the 102-person staff responded to Promise54's DEI Staff Experience Survey and found affirmation of the culture of diversity they'd successfully fostered. College Track's organizational profile aligned with the Advanced quadrant, with mid- to high indices across diversity, inclusion, and equity.



Since then, College Track has continued an intensive growth trajectory, bringing the organization to 140 full-time staff across 11 sites today. While College Track has successfully maintained staff diversity as they've grown, the additional size and complexity has exacerbated challenges around national-regional

CONSIDER THIS

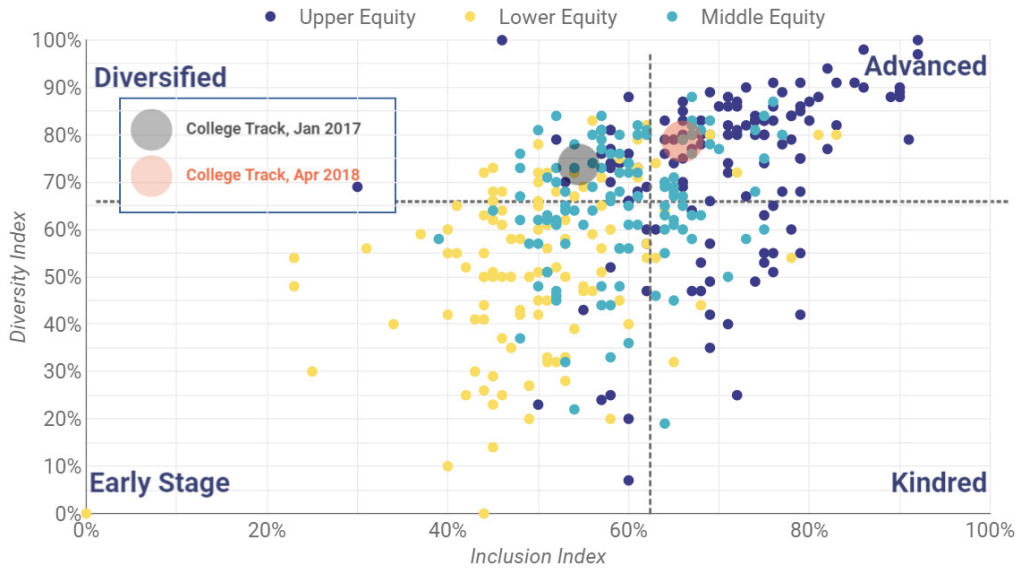
College Track is at the *tipping point* of 120-150 people, where research on organizational structures and growth points out that challenges often emerge.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How has your organization's size — and/or changes in that size — impacted its efforts around diversity, inclusion, and equity?

connection, communications, decision-making, management, and culture. Meanwhile, College Track's continued focus on codifying and leaning into DEI beliefs has heightened staff awareness of any gaps between their expectations and lived realities.

In 2018, the challenge of balancing organizational growth and maintaining inclusion and equity surfaced plainly in the new DEI Staff Experience Survey results, as the organization shifted from Advanced to Diversified.



Meanwhile, critical feedback from staff intensified:

> *"The retreat gave us something to look at in reaction to the survey… but it wasn't an action plan. There wasn't a conversation about who is taking on this work."*
>
> *—Ahmed Naguib*

> *"...everyone is anticipating, wondering what's happening next? And we haven't done anything in quite some time. People are asking…'What is this all for? Is it just an acronym or an initiative to make people feel good about staying here? Is this just to attract talent?'"*
>
> *—Marshall Lott*

> *"Who is owning [the DEI work]? How is it going to move forward? What roles are folks playing?"*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

> *"...people have assumptions and people are unclear about what [the DEI] goals are on all levels. We only have a certain number of people [who] are in this conversation. We need to get aligned on what this conversation is."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

So where does College Track go from here, and what are the main lessons they've learned through this period of growth and change?

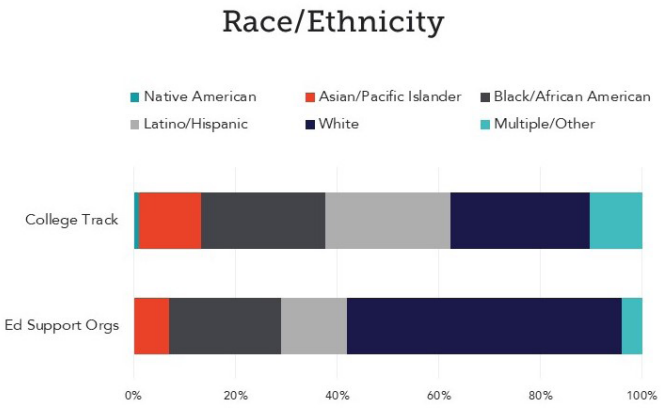
What They're Learning

We found the following central themes in our conversations with College Track, each of which illustrates real-world successes as well as opportunities to build a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable organizational culture:

1. Sustaining Diversity Requires Intentionality...and Codification
2. Broadening Narrow Definitions of Excellence
3. Communicating and Making Decisions Effectively at Scale
4. Developing a Shared Understanding of DEI

Sustaining Diversity Requires Intentionality...and Codification

College Track is a racially diverse organization. The organization's CEO, Elissa Salas, is Latina, and the executive team, board, and staff are all far more racially diverse than sector benchmarks for diversity:



Staff clearly note the diversity of their team:

95% of College Track staff agreed that "Our organization has a racially/ethnically diverse staff"

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This noteworthy diversity has been an intentional — albeit informal — process. Since its founding, College Track has consistently prioritized hiring people of color — particularly staff who represent the students the organization serves. Although there was no written policy or systematic effort, this hiring priority had a clear impact on staff composition over the years.

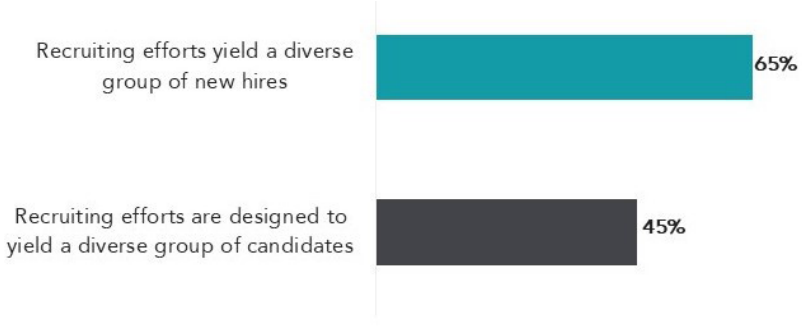
> *"All of this happened organically, I think in part because we are people of color-led, and our board has put such an emphasis on making sure that the leadership team is diverse."*
>
> *—Elissa Salas*

> *"Even though we don't have specific goals, the fact that it's on leaders' minds that diversity is important means a lot."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

While College Track has fostered diversity informally by relying on organizational values and staff networks, leadership notes that continued diversity may not sustain on its own:

> *"As we continue to grow and scale and replicate, I personally felt like it was important that we begin to institutionalize some of these practices and even ask the question 'What is beyond diversity?'"*
>
> *—Elissa Salas*

Staff shared the concern that as College Track continues to intensify its pace of growth, the organization increasingly risks defaulting to efficiency in hiring over slowing down to ensure that pools and hires are representative of the students the organization serves. The team's 2018 Staff Experience Survey results echoed the theme that while College Track has yielded diverse candidates thus far without a codified structure to sustain diverse recruiting, increased pace of growth could undermine this pattern.

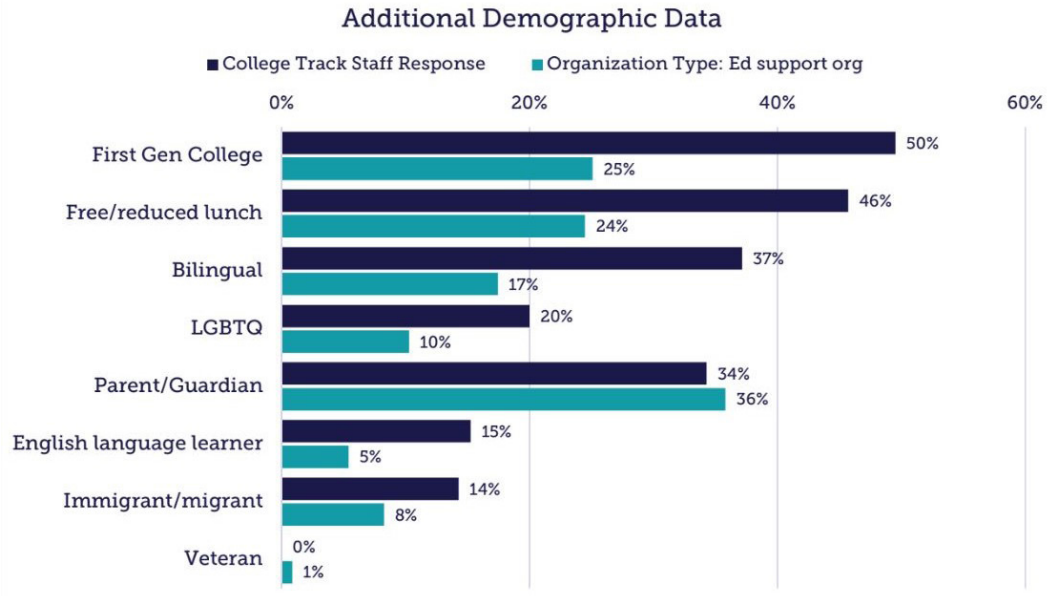


In agreement with staff, leadership has named a commitment to systematically maintain diversity. Elissa has created organizational structures for DEI work previously and intends to continue this priority.

As a start, College Track adjusted its formal recruiting strategy to focus on individuals with a background in similar nonprofit or direct service work, graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and graduates from Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Rather than relying solely on the social networks of existing leadership and staff, College Track began to codify recruitment pipelines to ensure a sustainable pool of racially diverse candidates. Chief Finance and Operating Officer Julia Chih understands, though, that this is only a start:

> *"We are strong on diversity.…I want it to be so ingrained in the culture that no matter who the leader is, [diversity] remains a part of the DNA of this organization and it will always be true."*
>
> *—Julia Chih*

In parallel to building systematically diverse recruitment efforts, College Track leadership and staff are also beginning the work of broadening the organization's very definition of diversity. While College Track is racially diverse, the team is increasingly cognizant of representation along other intersecting dimensions of identity. On its surface, College Track is ahead of peer organizations across multiple demographics:



However, leadership realizes that such representation doesn't exist across all levels of the organization. Notably, the leadership and executive teams currently comprise straight-identified and cisgender individuals only.

All in all, College Track remains ahead of the curve on diversity and is actively working to codify practices to sustain that diversity while broadening how they define diversity overall.

CONSIDER THIS

As your organization works to define diversity within your context, consider where the most tension, misalignment, or complexities might surface. In our experience, digging in on these hardest questions typically leads to the most robust definitions of diversity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Should College Track intentionally place a disproportionate emphasis on race above other identities? Why or why not?

Does your organization place a disproportionate emphasis on race? Should it? Why or why not?

What is our ideal state with regard to diversity: Perfectly mirror the communities we serve? Reach pure heterogeneity?

Broadening Narrow Definitions of Excellence

> *"One of the biggest surprises for me was the fact that we could be so diverse...yet there are still many folks in the organization who feel like we are not as inclusive as we can be."*
>
> *—Elissa Salas*

Despite College Track's high level of diversity, staff survey results reveal lingering challenges in advancing a shared experience of inclusion and equity. As the organization has expanded to different geographies, contexts, and communities, one of the major barriers to inclusion that leadership and staff describe is leading through narrow standards of excellence and implicit expectations at College Track.

> *"Another growth area is the dominant leadership style here — I know that I contribute to that.... A lot of us on [the National Leadership Team] are 'Type-A' people — we are outspoken, comfortable with engaging in argumentative communications.... How much of that is who we are and how much of that is part of white-dominant culture in terms of decision-making and authority?"*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

College Track staff share the same observation of implied and narrow expectations around communication style. Staff describe that individuals who are most comfortable communicating in extroverted and highly structured ways have the greatest chance of being seen, heard, and valued. This translates, in turn, to some feeling excluded if they don't conform.

> *"There's a profile of who 'fits' here.... If you aren't that personality, there's a lot of pressure for people to be more vocal... It's rooted in the 'type of people' we want here (...young, extroverted, Type-A)."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

> *"If your communication style doesn't align with [leadership's], the way you're perceived can be difficult.... I am just trying to...call out things that we can improve [because I'm] coming from a place of love for the work that we do. This creates the perception that I am super negative: 'She's always complaining.' This is a white-dominant culture work style."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

Some staff described how "fit," narrowly defined in terms like academic affiliation or communication style, influences hiring and performance management calibration conversations and elevates some over others.

These implicit ways of operating and narrow definitions of excellence impact experiences of inclusion and equity at College Track for Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ staff in particular. Significant disparities show up among white, Black, and Latinx staff members' perceptions of inclusion:

CHALLENGES TO INCLUSION

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CONSIDER THIS

One reason why diversity isn't sufficient to guarantee inclusion and equity? Default dominant cultural norms can self-sustain, even in a more diverse organization. It requires intentionality to shift them and transform organizational cultures to ones where individuals with diverse skills and approaches are authentically included and treated equitably.

The term "culture fit" has often been used as a catchall to describe whether a candidate aligns to the ways of thinking and acting at an organization. When the principles behind "fit" aren't made explicit and/or aren't interrogated thoroughly, individual biases and narrow perceptions of excellence can become the norm.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

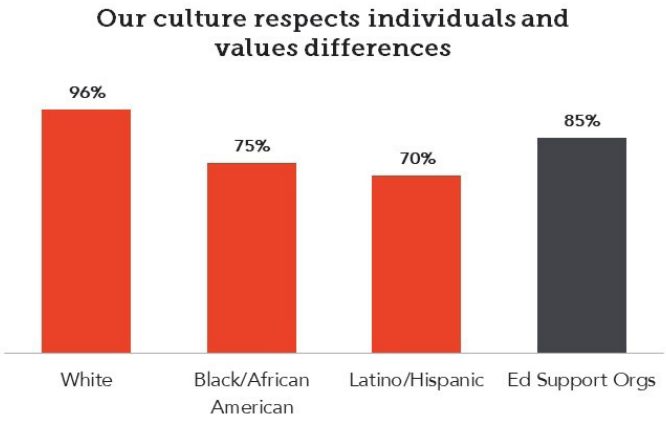
Staff identify several of these cultural norms and expectations as aspects of white-dominant culture norms. Do you agree?

Are there ways in which you see similar explicit or implicit expectations emerge in your organization?

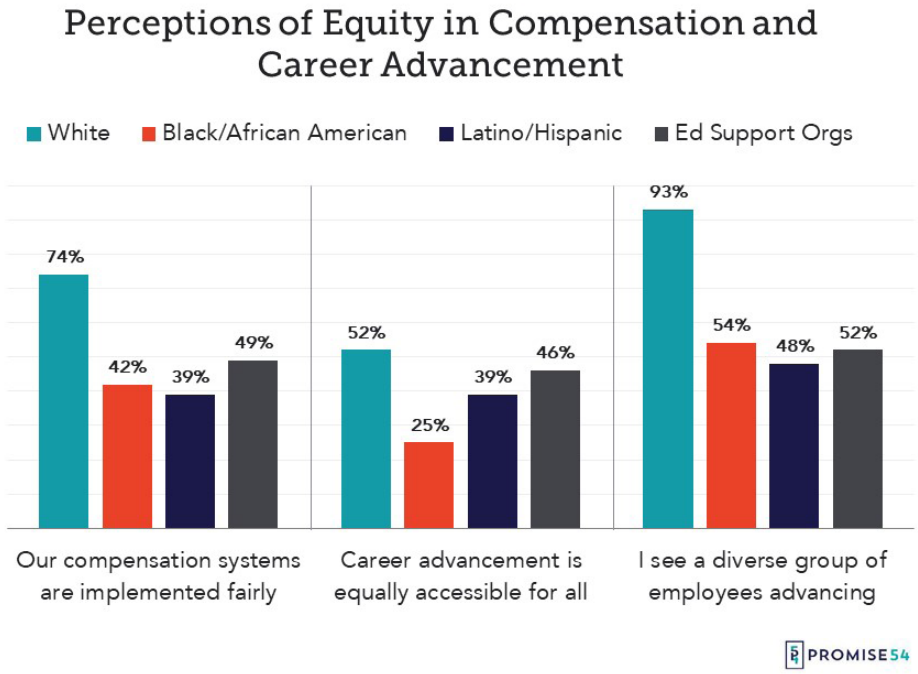
How would your organization describe the key characteristics that determine whether a candidate is a "fit"? Are these characteristics explicitly named or implicitly applied?

How do these characteristics expand or narrow the pathways to success at your organization?

Are each of these characteristics essential to achieving the mission of the organization? Why or why not?

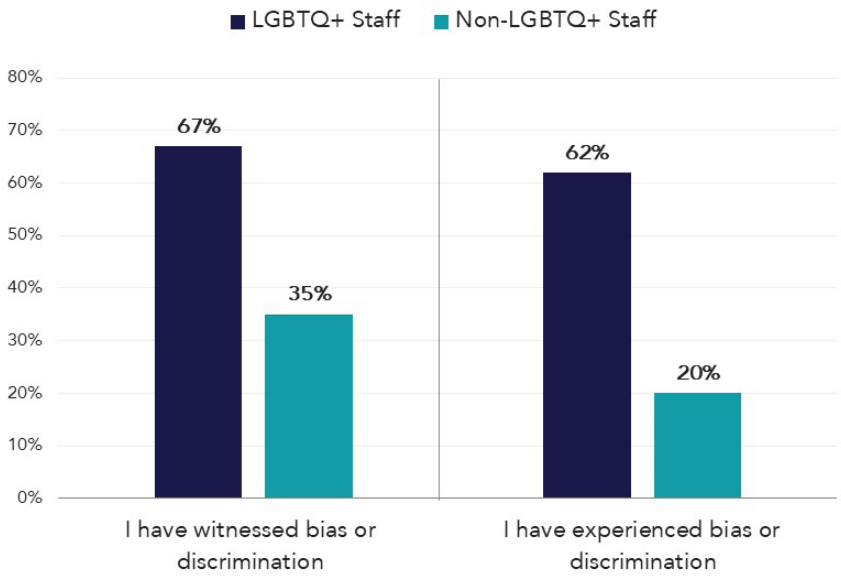


And while internal data around equity in relation to compensation and career advancement show little to no actual gaps by identity, Black and Latinx staff still perceive inequity at higher rates:



Further, staff members who identify as LGBTQ+ note an opportunity to improve their experience around inclusion and equity. One staff member shares, "I have advised trans folks not to work here. We are not ready to support trans and nonbinary folks." Other staff members spoke about the importance of gender-inclusive language — moving past "hey guys" when addressing a group, for example.

At College Track's annual staff-wide Town Hall in 2018, Elissa called out a difference she found particularly striking — that LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ staff were experiencing or witnessing bias at very disparate levels:



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Elissa acknowledges that to create a more inclusive and equitable culture at College Track, the organization needs to reconcile that being led by people of color doesn't prevent staff's perception of these narrow standards of excellence and implicit expectations.

Elissa and Julia are actively grappling with the intersection of their own identities as women of color and the challenges of leading DEI work at a large, complex organization:

> *"As people of color, what we do in this space is more scrutinized. It feels like we are held to different standards — like we have the answers or know what the right thing is since we're people of color...it feels like we can't make mistakes because everyone is watching."*
>
> *—Julia Chih*

As College Track continues on their DEI journey, leadership grapples with intentionally broadening and making explicit their definitions and expectations so that staff across all demographics experience belonging and fairness. For example, College Track has been deeply immersed in partnership with Promise54 to:

- Articulate the skills and behavioral indicators they believe to be most predictive of success, map those competencies to roles, and integrate this framework across the organization in areas from job descriptions to performance development and evaluation;

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

In what ways might an organizational leader's identities inform and impact the way they experience and lead DEI work?

How do your identities inform and impact the way you experience and lead DEI work? How do they inform and impact the way you lead, communicate, form relationships, and make decisions more generally?

- Support cohorts of approximately 25 leaders at a time through an internal management capacity-building training program to build common language and skills on a range of topics, including effective communications, decision-making, feedback, systems thinking, and change management; and
- Engage a cross-section of staff in an intentional process to interrogate and refine job profiles for some of the roles deemed most crucial to the organization's success, clarifying the ways in which expectations are articulated and challenging traditional expectations about prerequisite credentials that have not been linked, in actuality, to success over time.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

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Communicating and Making Decisions Effectively at Scale

As College Track has expanded, the organization has struggled to maintain transparent, two-way communication among leadership, staff, national, and regional subgroups of the team. Long-standing tools for gathering feedback from a smaller team are no longer serving the larger organization well:

> *"We have a staff engagement survey...and we do monitor staff perception and we use that data to drive strategy. The former administration had started that when we were small and we were only 35 employees...[but now] it's really hard when you get this broad data set and you don't know how to intervene."*
>
> *—Elissa Salas*

Leadership describes the challenge of adjusting to the new normal. "The shift for me has been having to accept that we're getting to a point where I can't walk into a site and know every person," reflects Julia. She acknowledges that communication on a larger team "needs more structure and process," which leadership has struggled to provide historically. Elissa describes the team's ongoing struggle to "wrestle with the limits of technology and figure out how to make communications...feel much more reciprocal [and two-way] versus things [being] communicated out." Even with the best intentions to include staff in organization-wide decisions, efforts have fallen short, leading to confusion and frustration among staff.

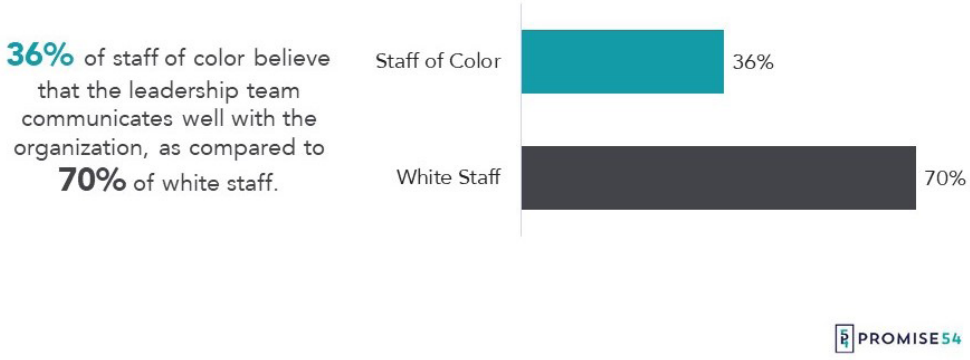
Alongside communication, decision-making has proven a challenge. Leadership intention has been to push decision-making out to those closest to the students and families being served, and Elissa describes her belief in "the deliberate principle that decisions and relationship should be held [at levels] closer to the work." However, that conviction hasn't consistently translated to staff's experience. Instead, staff reflect on the hope that "decision-making power was redistributed to the sites as opposed to only at [the] national [level]. We are closest to the students, and we know the students and communities."

Staff express a desire for open and structured opportunities for input into decision-making, craving clarity about how and when feedback is incorporated as well as the rationale for certain decisions. For example, while leadership was thoughtful and deliberate in developing organizational strategy for creating

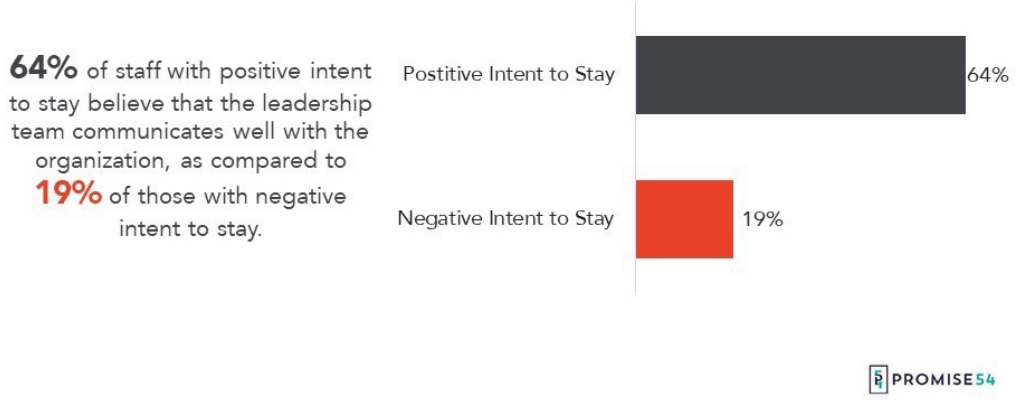
new regional structures as College Track's geographic reach expanded, staff describe a lack of stakeholder engagement in that process:

> *"It was really smart thinking on what to do, but it was just planted on people. There wasn't really a lot of change management. We were really thoughtful on expansion, but not necessarily on implementation and communication around what we were doing and why along the way."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

Staff Experience Survey results indicate that staff of color feel the communication challenges with leadership most acutely:



Moreover, these communication gaps surface as an influential factor on staff's intent to stay at the organization:



College Track leadership is very much aware of these challenges and in response has been intentionally working to address them. Leadership has leveraged several mechanisms to increase internal communication and decision-making clarity, including:

- Lifting up priorities from sites and regions in the annual planning process;
- Engaging Regional EDs and Site Directors in biannual organization-wide business planning and strategy meetings;
- Engaging Site Directors and the VP of Programs in collaborative discussions on programmatic priorities and continual improvement;

CONSIDER THIS

This correlation between communication and intent to stay is extremely common. Specifically, in Promise54's Unrealized Impact data, the two questions most highly correlated with staff intent to stay in their organizations over the next three years are around effective leadership communications and free and open exchange of ideas.

- Bringing the full, cross-site team together annually to connect and communicate at an all-staff retreat;
- Inviting all staff to inform decision-making at annual town halls;
- Assembling cross-functional, voluntary working groups to address ad hoc challenges (e.g., part-time staffing, salesforce implementation, and ongoing DEI support); and
- Continuing to administer the Promise54 DEI Staff Experience Survey to better understand the team's experiences and perceptions.

CONSIDER THIS

Resisting defensiveness and embracing vulnerability can foster connection and a sense of inclusion between leadership and staff.

As the organization works to enhance communications and decision-making, staff desire a greater sense of openness and vulnerability from leadership in the process.

> *"Generally, it feels like [leadership] has to be convinced on things, no matter what it is. There's a lot of either/or thinking...where it feels like my truth and experience here can't be different from [leadership's]."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

Leadership describes the tension between their earnest efforts and staff's experience of wanting more vulnerability as a clear intent versus impact gap:

> *"This is what I mean by missed intentions — we feel like the DEI work is so important that we made a deliberate decision to focus on DEI in our fall town halls and at our annual December all-staff retreat. Our intention was really to have more of an open dialogue...but what was experienced by staff was that leadership was absolving ourselves of responsibility. We were trying to create a more inclusive space and collectively own the DEI work, yet I totally understand how someone might have experienced it [differently].... We know we don't have a perfect process, so we are trying to not come with all the answers and show some vulnerability, but it wasn't perceived that way. And this is a learning for us. This work is so hard!"*
>
> *—Julia Chih*

Developing a Shared Understanding of DEI

As College Track works to accommodate their larger scale by improving communication, decision-making transparency, and engagement, they are also beginning to create organizational alignment on what the words diversity, inclusion, and equity mean in their context. In the spring and summer of 2018, College Track formed a cross-functional working group comprising staff members of various levels and roles to help the organization draft their DEI beliefs statement. Headed by a senior leader nominated by Elissa and facilitated by Promise54, the working group reflected on their Promise54 DEI Staff Experience Survey results, surfaced key values and language related to DEI at College Track, pressure-tested the draft statement with a variety of stakeholders on the team, then revised.

College Track

College Track's Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

College Track's mission to ensure our students earn a college degree calls us to disrupt historic injustices, racism, and systemic oppression. Too often, our institutions and systems limit students' opportunities, rather than set them up for a life of self-determination and freedom. College Track's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion derives from our unwavering belief that all students can, and one day will, experience a world that honors their inherent talents, gifts, and knowledge.

We believe diverse perspectives lead to stronger ideas, striking innovation, and effective practices, accelerating our progress toward our mission. College Track prioritizes building diverse teams that reflect the experiences of our students to ensure our community shapes our approach. Additionally, we cultivate an inclusive environment and culture of belonging for our staff and students—a critical step in our pursuit of equity.

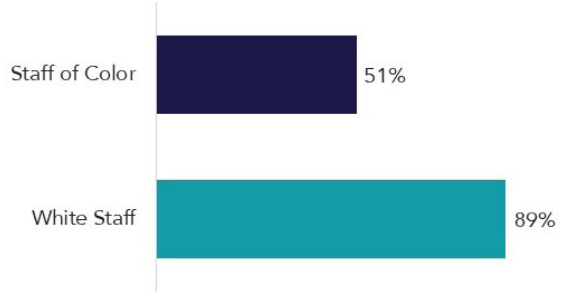
College Track welcomes and reveres the spectrum of human diversity, and stands against bigotry, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and other biases that seek to undermine the dignity of all people. The barriers our staff and students face are deeply entrenched in our society. Therefore, we regularly examine the impact of our policies, processes, and procedures and refine them to build a more equitable community.

Drafting their beliefs statement was a critical step for College Track. Even so, the words alone haven't guaranteed a shared understanding of DEI concepts among a dispersed staff, or clarity on College Track's implementation plan moving forward. Two roadblocks have emerged: the impact of communication challenges on aligned understanding across the growing team, and a need to specify definitions for diversity, inclusion, and equity beyond the beliefs statement.

> *"We use the term 'equity' to refer to everything being the same. That's not equity.... Internal equity doesn't mean everything being the same. Salaries for sites, performance measures — things are not all the same at every site. We need to get this cleared up as an org. They're using equity incorrectly, and that is frustrating."*
>
> *—Anonymous Staff Member*

Staff's differing perspectives on, and understanding of, equity at College Track also show up in the Promise54 Staff Experience Survey. Staff indicate varied levels of agreement with the statement that College Track has an explicit commitment to equity, with discrepancies along lines of race and ethnicity in particular.

51% of staff of color believe that College Track has an explicit commitment to equity, as compared to **89%** of white staff.



PROMISE54

Developing common definitions of diversity, inclusion, and equity is a clear next step for College Track, particularly as the number of staff — and perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints — grows. College Track is committed to increasing alignment on such key terms.

> *"I am glad we are in a place where we can have this conversation.... [College Track] and certainly I have a value around [equity] and we just have to figure out how to do it.... We all want it to be equitable, but one person's definition of equity might be different than others'.... This is the work, and it's challenging, and we're invested in it."*
>
> *—Julia Chih*

Thus far, College Track has:

- Engaged the cross-functional DEI working group to create a draft set of definitions for the terms diversity, inclusion, and equity;
- Shared these draft definitions across the staff and collected input;
- Scheduled time to engage the DEI working group to incorporate the feedback and grapple with outstanding questions in relation to each definition;
- Created plans to share final definitions across the staff; and
- Begun to think about how to design staff training to facilitate a shared understanding of what these concepts look like in action.

Where They're Headed

College Track's journey continues — their work hasn't stopped, even as the context has shifted with organizational growth. At College Track's August all-staff meeting, CEO Elissa Salas rolled out updates on the scope of the organization's DEI plan. The organization has explicitly committed to three priorities for ongoing DEI work.

Leadership recognizes the magnitude of the task ahead and is committed to the ongoing, iterative journey:

> *"I think all this speaks to not just how hard the work is, but how much opportunity there is for College Track to match intentions with impact in terms of internal communication. We have more to learn and we need to try to do things differently to get different results...we have to try things, and take risks, and maybe we'll get there."*
>
> *—Julia Chih*

LOOKING AHEAD

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CONSIDER THIS

You've probably heard it a hundred times, but the truth is, this work is never over — it's a journey, not a destination. And that is especially true in the context of a dynamic and ever-growing organization. Even with the best intentions, demographic representation, and previous success in DEI work, there's no guarantee of consistent progress in the face of major shifts.

"I'm thinking about what is the thing we are actually trying to achieve and how do we know that we have actually reached it? And I am not quite sure in this work that there is ever a point at which we are done."

—Elissa Salas

Glossary

When we support organizations to work on their priorities around diversity, inclusion, and equity, we encourage an intentional, inclusive process to define these critical terms in context. This is especially important because, while ~50% of education organizations believe DEI is related to their vision, mission, and/or values, less than ~20% have defined the terms for their own organizational context. This can lead to substantially different ideas of what an organization is working toward, how to best get there, or what individuals can expect from their day-to-day experiences. For a set of common, starting definitions applicable across each of our case study organizations, we use the following:

Diversity

Variation; the presence of different types of people (from a wide range of identities and with different perspectives, experiences, etc.).

When we partner with organizations to support their DEI work, some of the critical considerations we surface as they work to tailor their definition of diversity are:

- Whether they're intentionally placing a disproportionate emphasis on race and ethnicity in defining diversity, and why they would or would not do so
- Whether they are intentionally focusing on any other aspects of diversity, and why or why not; and
- What the ideal demographic makeup of their staff would be if they thought about their staff representation goals from a diversity standpoint.

Inclusion

Embracing diversity by creating an environment of involvement, respect, and connection — where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed to create value.

When we partner with organizations to support their DEI work, some of the critical considerations we surface as they tailor their definition of inclusion are:

- What indicators various identity groups may experience today related to sense of belonging, connectedness, agency, voice, and psychological safety as well as whether, how, and why those indicators differ by identity groups; and
- Whether and how those varied experiences need to change in the future.

Equity

Ensuring equally high outcomes for all and removing the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any identity marker.

When we partner with organizations to support their DEI work, some of the critical considerations we surface as they tailor their definition of equity are:

- The distinction between equity and equality. Equity ensures that everyone has what they need to be successful, taking into account different starting points and institutionalized biases. Equality means everyone receives the same resources and support, no matter their starting point. While equality may aim to promote fairness, it assumes that everyone starts from the same place and faces the same institutional barriers along the way toward outcomes; and
- To what degree the organizationintends to be focused on liberation (freeing ourselves and those that we aim to serve from the oppressive structures around us) versus equity (supporting those that we aim to serve to be successful within oppressive structures) and how those answers should impact an organization's specific definition of equity.

Net Promoter Score

We created a promoter index comprised of a high score on intent to stay and/or willingness to recommend the organization to a friend.

Intent to Stay

This measure in our Staff Experience Survey looks at a staff member's self-reported likelihood of working in the same organization in three years.

White Dominant Culture

The norms, values, beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving, and decision-making that are more familiar to and come more naturally to those from a white, Western tradition. These are the dominant, unquestioned standards of behavior and ways of functioning that are embedded and often unintentionally reproduced in our national culture by the vast majority of institutions in the United States. White-dominant culture results in a less inclusive environment, and is rooted in each person's interest in maintaining their own access to power and/or resources. These norms can be upheld by both white people and people of color.

Kenneth Jones and Dr. Tema Okun worked to define the white-dominant culture norms listed below, naming that these characteristics are "damaging because they are used as norms and standards without being proactively named or chosen by the group." In addition, they promote white supremacy thinking, or the idea that white people and the ideas, beliefs, and values of white people are superior to people of color and their ideas, beliefs, and values.

Defensiveness & Denial	Either/Or Thinking	Fear of Open Conflict
I'm The Only One	Individualism	Objectivity
One Right Way	Paternalism	Perfectionism
Power Hoarding	Progress is Bigger, More	Quantity Over Quality
Right to Comfort	Sense of Urgency	Worship of the Written Word

Psychological Safety

An individual's perception of the consequences they face in taking an interpersonal risk; the belief that a team is safe for risk-taking.

In a team with high psychological safety, individuals feel safe to take risks around their team members. They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish them or anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea.

Acknowledgements

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Promise54's mission is to help adults thrive so they can better serve kids, families, and communities. We envision a day when organizations committed to educational equity can have maximum impact because they have:

- The right people excelling in the right roles;
- Teams that include perspectives, identities, and experiences of the communities served;
- Cultures of belonging, trust, and connection; and
- Equitable internal structures, systems, and behaviors.