A CALL TO CHARACTER:
DIVERSITY . EQUITY . INCLUSION

@ The University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, the University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work has experienced exponential growth and advancement over many measures in its abilities to improve lives—growth in sheer size, grants and contracts, student aid, development and graduate and post-doc work, to name a few. At the same time, the school has evolved along parameters of identity, diversity and intersectionality, especially among its student population, who also bring with them a millennial activist approach. The presence of these students, as well as like-minded faculty, staff and alumni, have elevated powerful questions about divisive issues on campus: micro-aggressions, culturally competent leadership and teaching, faculty and administrative diversity, transparency, governance, and explicit and implicit curriculums of oppression and empowerment.

These questions have challenged the SSW and its leadership to step to the forefront—even to the cutting edge—of what it means to embody diversity, equity and inclusion. This moment is a call to character for the SSW, a call to integrity, intention and evolution. It is a call to become the change the school and its citizens wish to see in the world.

The University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work DEI External Review

To that goal, *The UMB SSW DEI External Review* launched in April of 2019 to conduct a third-party assessment of diversity, equity and inclusion dynamics in the SSW and to provide recommendations to support the community moving forward. In the background of this work, a high-profile series of diversity flashpoints (editorials, leadership clashes with students, etc.) have created powerful tensions in the school.

We brought five skilled researchers and spent four full days on campus conducting over 40 listening sessions and group interviews plus surveys, interacting with faculty, staff, students and leadership at the School of Social Work. Our data collected filled nearly 1,000 pages of transcribed remarks, comments and thoughts from the participants of our study.

In evaluating our research we discovered that, while challenged, the SSW is in some ways light-years ahead of other organizations we have examined, due to the notable sophistication and willingness of their faculty, staff and students to engage in DEI issues as a priority—a willingness likely stemming from the importance of embodying cultural competency in their core profession.

Yet understanding DEI issues empirically and having a personal commitment to them conceptually does not always translate to a capacity to build the strategy, infrastructure, pedagogy and skills required to give these issues primacy operatively and as a matter of culture. Moreover, building demographic diversity is not the end-all, be-all of inclusion. In many ways, it is just the beginning.

The greater challenge now for SSW is to create educational and work environments that allow that diversity to thrive—to create a broad-based, secure feeling of community, inclusion and belonging throughout campus. The school must be ready to manage flashpoints and demonstrate its deep commitment to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in our imperfect shared reality.

At UMB SSW, we identified a need for an expansive set of interlocking activities to spark dialogue, engagement, capacity-building and development—a need to immediately begin changing the narrative and, more importantly, the lived experience on the ground for students, faculty, staff and alumni. This report summarizes the approach, findings and recommendations of our work.

Section 1: What Is Campus Climate? A Framework and Methodology

The presence of individuals from different backgrounds results in *diversity*. *Climate*, on the other hand, refers to the *experience* of individuals and groups as members of the campus community (Hurtado, 2005). The term "campus climate" quickly summarizes the inclusivity dynamics of an organization. Based on real and perceived realities, this concept is always nested in a broader socio-historical context of difference, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and a near limitless range of social identities. In a nutshell, diversity and inclusion efforts are simply not complete unless they also address climate.

- *The Campus Climate Conceptual Framework.* Hurtado and Associates (1998) provided a multi-dimensional framework that informed this study's data collection, including external factors such as government and policy context and socio-historical contexts, including those of the school as well as the city of Baltimore. These factors pervade what happens on campus in ways that are nearly impossible for institutions to control and even influence, particularly at urban institutions like UMB. This research framework relies on five internal factors as well: history of inclusion and exclusion, demographics, psychology or how individuals feel about their campus experience, behavior or interactions between groups, and the organizational diversity leadership to date.

- *Data Triangulation and Top-Level Insights.* While this study does not provide a quantitative analysis of the SSW campus climate, it does provide enough top-level insights to gain a sense of the institutional environment and key on- and off-campus issues shaping the experience of students, faculty and staff. Our analyses triangulate multiple sources of data from interviews, online surveys and listening sessions to help gain a bird's-eye understanding of the lived experience of diverse groups on campus, as well as key areas of strength and improvement moving forward.

- *Limitations and Strengths.* Our study had a number of limitations. Implemented on a timeline of less than four weeks, it was difficult to recruit and improve participation numbers. Additionally, this study probed a relatively small number of concepts. No quantitative data collection or analytic methodologies were used, but, on the positive side, our data are grounded in strong qualitative methods that make them highly credible. More than 300 data inputs allowed us to generate a depth of information that clarified root causes behind the research findings and recommendations offered here. Yet we acknowledge that we did not have the time or personnel to check every fact in the quotes that were used in the full report and we suggest that readers not uncritically accept the veracity of the factual information offered in quotes from respondents.

Section 2: Key Research Findings

The UMB School of Social Work sits at a crossroads. In our study into its campus climate, several clear, overarching themes emerged from our interviews and listening sessions. These themes provide insights into key issues on the minds of students, staff, faculty and leadership and form the basis for our recommendations offered in Section 3.

The two most supportive themes here are the degree of diversity and social consciousness innate in the student body as well as the faculty and staff's overall willingness for DEI training and initiatives. The other themes suggest areas of improvement for the school, yet we note that many of these issues are shared by other institutions we have worked with across the country. Here are the seven main themes we heard:

(1) *Racial Dynamics in the City of Baltimore: A Highly Charged Context for SSW Leaders.* The complex and racially charged socio-political forces surrounding the SSW has greatly influenced the campus climate. The mission, research and pedagogy of the SSW created a closeness and a permeability with the city that may be different from that of its peer schools within UMB. Faculty and leaders that had been with the School of Social Work for years reported that the unrest of 2015 impacted the school deeply in a way that was incompletely addressed and lingers today.

(2) *A Diverse and Socially Conscious Student Body Pushes for Change.* Our qualitative data suggests that many of the most vocal and influential SSW students are part a class of millennial-generation leaders who are not only sharply aware of these issues, but deeply committed to social justice, change and dismantling systems of oppression. The broad diversity, activism and social consciousness of the student body is both a gift and a challenge for the college. As a gift, it creates a unique opportunity for students to learn across differences and to become even savvier in their ability to communicate and lead in culturally diverse communities and environments—all valuable skills in high demand for 21st century social workers.

The challenge comes when the worldview, goals and pedagogy of students may be radically different than those of the school leadership/faculty and even different than the historical roots of the field of social work.

The conversation seems to have devolved into debate and disjointed discussions more than dialogue, which is deeply needed. A lack of transparency, misinformation and fear are interfering with a healthy campus climate.

(3) *Poor Leadership on Matters of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).* Plaudits for the school's explosive growth were joined by an equally strong critique of the dean's leadership around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. The dean's recent efforts to elevate the school's activity on diversity, equity and inclusion has not closed the relationship rift between the SSW administration and some of its students, staff and faculty. Participants noted reactionary or haphazard missteps to past flashpoints plus a lack of a strategic plan and permanent leadership in DEI, while we found a leadership team that does care but may be unprepared for the demands of DEI leadership.

(4) *A Perceived Climate of Micro-Aggressions and an Incomplete Definition of Diversity.* A number of participants in our listening sessions, and others in response to the open-ended surveys, characterized their experience in the SSW as fraught with micro-aggressions. These exchanges, intentional or unintentional, communicate hostility or prejudicial slights and insults towards specific forms of social identity. They often have a slow, cumulative effect on their targets, who feel invalidated, insulted and sometimes assaulted. The findings of micro-aggression are unsurprising yet unacceptable in the culture of the SSW.

Strong perspectives want to expand the SSW's DEI focus to include not just race, but also to include gender, disability, LBGTQIA, poverty, mental health and other identities as well as conversations of intersectionality. For a full conversation of DEI, historically or positionally privileged members of the community must be embraced and included, especially a white community, which in some instances feels boxed out as legitimate diverse contributors to the conversation. Discomfort naturally occurs when real DEI growth is occurring, and it is important for *everyone* to feel "stretch" if true community is to emerge, including activist communities of Black students, faculty, staff, and community members.

(5) *A Lack of Diversity Among Faculty and Leadership.* Student diversity, a Baltimore location, the lack of DEI leadership and more help us understand the clarion call for racial and ethnic diversity among leadership and faculty, especially at the full professor level. Because some judge DEI success based only on numerical shifts in representation of historically underrepresented minority groups and women, it is crucial to develop a Strategic Diversity Leadership Scorecard to track and monitor SSW's progress across a balanced set of indicators (Williams, 2013). Research can help point to places where communication, recruitment, promotion and other issues can be adjusted to improve faculty diversity.

Diversity in campus faculty and leadership creates potential for learning. It establishes important aspirational role models for diverse students. Insomuch as majority students are inadequately exposed to diverse faculty, experiences, knowledge and skill training during their education, their preparation must be considered inadequate for today's diverse world.

(6) *Is DEI Professional Development Enough? Anti-Oppression Education and Other Discordant Tensions in the SSW.* To their credit, many faculty we interviewed are unusually open to, even eager for, the DEI learning journey, which is a strong foundation for the SSW to build upon and potentially lead within UMB in this priority. Yet this positive is partially masked by a culture where early adopters are not lauded for their efforts but disparaged for not doing enough, a source of discordant nuances that make some hesitant to be vulnerable and take steps forward in training and exploration.

The greatest issue slowing the SSW was the lack of an overall DEI framework or plan for professional development. Additionally, some fissures around anti-oppressive education have caused disruption in the SSW, given that leadership has not fully bought into this perspective. Creating a positive campus climate will rest on leaders' and the community's ability to agree about: what it means to be a "DEI-focused" organization, to be committed to DEI issues, and how the SSW wants to define itself ("anti-oppression," "anti-racism", inclusive excellence, multicultural, or another approach) as the conceptual and operational anchor for their work moving forward.

(7) *General Climate Challenges Exacerbating Diversity and Inclusion Dynamics.* This theme reflected a collection of hurdles to address. A number of stakeholders believe that communication with leadership is broken and that the system of governance does not allow for fully shared engagement in decision-making about the future of the school with those who deeply care. Faculty governance is a strength, but staff and nontenure-track faculty expressed a sense of marginalization, partly rooted in the school's decade of speedy growth. We noted a desire for transparency along several avenues and a mistrust of the administration's ability to address key issues and to keep them informed, an issue that must be repaired for an effective diversity, equity and inclusion stance.

We clearly noted racialized perspectives and (mis)perceptions, especially around recent issues such as the editorial letter and ongoing possible incidents of white privilege. Some staff harbor resentment towards the administration, are frustrated by ambiguous promotion and pay processes, and feel they have a diminishing voice overall, in part due to the school's rapid expansion.

Given the many best practices and evidence-based solutions available, our recommendations suggest next steps for the SSW consider to best build its strategic diversity leadership and inclusive excellence for the future.

Section 3: Recommendations

With several positive DEI actions under way at the SSW, we offer seven interrelated recommendations to jump-start and solidify the process. This effort must center on collaborative and collective work that recruits many across campus, at every level, from administrators to students. The more people activated by this infrastructure and activity, the more this work will accelerate in beneficial ways for the school and UMB overall.

Recommendation 1. Commit to Big-Bet Action Steps to Drive Change

Change is best driven by your "big bets," carefully selected actions that generate tremendous value and drive outcome. The key is to be pointed and make choices—to *not* do everything all at once (though the community will want everything all at once.) Yet move forward aggressively, make a big splash, and communicate broadly that you have a plan and are implementing it. We recommend several such steps, including:

- Establish a Strategic Diversity Leadership Framework and a Scorecard for accountability.
- Build a School-wide DEI Infrastructure, including a senior diversity officer role and department point leaders to pick up the work of the Diversity and Anti-Oppression (DAO) committee.
- Commit to a Professional Development Training Plan to ensure that every UMB SSW faculty, staff and employee has training directly aligned with their day-to-day reality. This training should not just expose the campus community to topics like implicit bias, the challenges of faculty diversity and micro-aggressions, but help them learn to overcome these challenges.
- Set Up an Intergroup Dialogue Program for community groups and infuse the principles of intergroup dialogue in your DEI work to drive conversation and interaction across differences and to develop a higher level of cultural competence on campus and in your social work.
- Establish an Annual School-wide Inclusive Excellence Forum to showcase progress, to be publicly accountable and to reward outstanding citizens of inclusive excellence.
- Develop a Diversity Hiring Initiative to support the goals of increasing social and intellectual diversity, driving student learning and scholarly inquiry, while more broadly defining diversity and gaining faculty governance sign-off.
- Create a New First-Year DEI Course, building from the first-year course and considering how a focus on cultural humility and DEI will map across the entire curriculum. Inclusion is a key to learning.

Recommendation 2. Develop a Strategic Diversity Leadership Framework,
Accountability System and Launch Plan to Guide Your Work

Create a wide framework for how you plan to tackle diversity, equity and inclusion, one that is complimented by a strategic plan and a scorecard that is clear and pointed in its priorities. This plan should focus on accountability. We recommend you fast-track it, rolling this out in the summer or early fall of 2019. Retro-align this process with the budget as well. Include a diversity and inclusion vision statement, dimensions of organizational diversity priority, an educational/business/social justice case rationale, goals for each area and key metrics such as monitoring your faculty turnover quotient. Address accountability for DEI in hiring and performance review to make diversity a visible variable in this process. Finally, create a launch plan.

Recommendation 3. Develop A High-Caliber Associate Dean for Strategic Diversity Leadership Role
and an Office of Inclusive Excellence

Many in the SSW community expressed a strong desire for a dedicated senior diversity administrative function within the school, one that works *with* the dean and other school leaders. We recommend a full-time position at the level of *Associate Dean for Strategic Diversity Leadership,* reporting to the dean, along with appropriate funding. We recommend the establishment of a funded Office of Inclusive Excellence along with the appropriate staff to enable it to be most effective. This setup can send a strong message to the community and others that DEI is a top priority moving forward and help improve diversity in the SSW.

The associate dean should be a big-picture leader who partners well with other senior leaders within the school and in the broader campus community, and in the full report, we offer a list of characteristics for this leader to support your search. Your ADSDL will lead, guide and expand the work of diversity, equity and inclusion and steward the school forward collaboratively. To get this effort off the ground, appoint a "special assistant to the dean" role as a temporary interim, to start building from insights offered here.

Recommendation 4. Develop the Lateral Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Infrastructure

Essential to the long-term success of your DEI activity, lateral diversity structures improve your implementation and we offer several insights to move you towards this crucial goal, including: establishing a SSW bias response team; building dotted-line relationships within the school with the new ADSDL; setting up DEI point persons in each department as well as in development, alumni, community and other areas; creating a DEI funding code; building an annual plan review process; creating an advisory committee for community engagement, and more.

Recommendation 5. Hire a New Dean Who Has Top Strategic Diversity Leadership Skills and Abilities

As the SSW looks to the future, strategic diversity leadership should be a top-three characteristic of the next dean. We offer several potential actions steps to accomplish this goal, such as including students, faculty, staff and alumni in the search process, plus creative search ideas for reaching out to diverse and diversity-savvy candidates and advice for vetting them.

Recommendation 6. Strengthen Institutional Branding in the Area of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Communication is everything, and concurrent with the other recommended actions, the UMB SSW should develop a clear approach for marketing and positioning around inclusive excellence. While we did not do a deep dive, we focused on how the SSW can create public accountability and clearly communicate your DEI direction institutionally via your website and other avenues. We recommend leveraging this report by publicly sharing highlights of key action steps and the credibility of our research team and process, to begin shifting the narrative.

Recommendation 7. Consider New Approaches to Governance and Engagement

While a review of governance systems is far outside of the scope of this engagement, a core challenge point that became apparent was the need for more transparency and engagement in the process of decision-making and shared

governance in the school with SSW constituents who are not tenured faculty members. We recommend a few steps such as appointing a small working group to identify low-hanging fruit in this area that can immediately be implemented, as well as working on longer-term solutions.

Section 4: Concluding Thoughts and Next Steps

Educational institutions today need a clear DEI infrastructure and plan not only for building capacity and community in times of calm, but for helping leaders respond well in moments of crisis. This report outlined a detailed roadmap for the SSW, one that can support the school in its call to character as well as position it as a leader around growing DEI issues that are so essential for the elevation of cultural competence in your disciplinary DNA. We offered insights about the SSW campus climate and promising practices to help you build a clear framework and take rapid action toward a positive well-oiled infrastructure.

We also acknowledge that many, if not all, of these recommendations may prove helpful to the other schools and colleges at UMB as well, where a central DEI vision, infrastructure and leadership can only further support SSW as well as the other UMB schools as positively contributing citizens of Baltimore and the world.

As you consider these themes and recommendations and weigh your next actions, you can leverage this report in three ways: (1) Inform the SSW campus community by distributing this report's executive summary or full report available to key stakeholders, (2) Discuss this report with the dean and ask him to outline his plans and a timeline for activation, and (3) Discuss this report with key senior leaders and charge them with supporting activation of those recommendations you are poised to advance.

We at the Center for Strategic Diversity Leadership and Social Innovation have been honored to work with the UMB School of Social Work community and leadership to help you move towards your vision of building an inclusive, supportive campus environment.
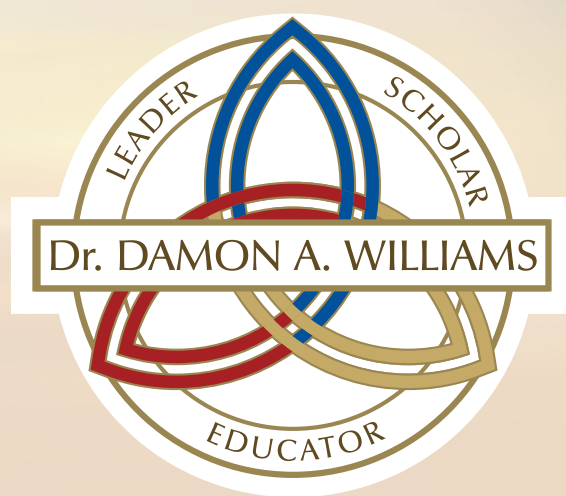
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