



# Equity Resource Teams: A Project-Based Approach to Fostering a Climate of Inclusion

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diversity, equity, leadership

Chief diversity officers (CDOs) play a vital role in fostering environments of diversity, equity, and inclusion on college and university campuses. As lead strategists, they are responsible for implementing a number of initiatives to promote effective organizational and cultural change. Too often, CDOs spend more time focusing on the “what” instead of the “how.” Thus, there is a greater need for practical and evidenced-based approaches to diversity that result in sustainable efforts in order to achieve long-term success.



James. A Felton III

One approach to strategic diversity leadership is the development of employee resource groups (ERGs). Shelton Goode, executive director of diversity and inclusion with the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, defines an ERG as a “voluntary, employee-led group made up of individuals who join together based on common interests, backgrounds, or demographic factors such as gender, race, or ethnicity.” ERGs have existed in the corporate sector for several

decades and have helped corporations leverage the experiences and talent of their employees to create a competitive advantage. Building upon this approach to strategic diversity leadership, I was motivated to develop a similar diversity strategy around the concept of an equity resource team.

Analogous to an ERG, an equity resource team (ERT) is also composed of individuals who express an interest in working with different groups or dimensions of diversity. A unique feature of an ERT is that it is based on principles of project-based learning. This type of learning takes place when participants explore a particular topic through an applied and experiential approach. In turn, they apply what they learn to address the particular topic or issue. ERTs are specifically charged with addressing issues related to equity on campus.

I had an opportunity to establish an ERT initiative as part of my former institution's participation in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' project "Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: Campus-Based Strategies for Student Success." Through my involvement in this project, I was able to work with the vice president of academic affairs, various deans, and a group of faculty to address equity gaps in gateway courses (developmental, high-risk, or high-enrolled). This initiative linked the work of the Diversity Committee, the faculty-led Curriculum Transformation Project, and the new Center for Teaching and Learning, in addition to our strategic plan.

Working with institutional leaders, I established five ERTs, each composed of three to five faculty and instructional staff members. Teams were grouped by courses in which significant equity and achievement gaps existed for underrepresented student populations. Faculty met twice a month over a period of a year to develop and implement strategies that combined culturally responsive teaching and cross-cultural communication pedagogies with high-impact practices. At the same time, they worked to increase the academic completion and success of all students.

Additionally, teams participated in professional development workshops on topics such as unconscious bias, stereotype threat, and deficit model thinking to better understand how teaching and learning affect the experiences of different students in the classroom. Faculty received a one-credit stipend for their participation and were responsible for creating a tool kit of strategies that could be used by other faculty across the college.

There are a number of benefits to applying a project-based approach such as an ERT to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on campus, and institutions have much to gain from the experience. Some of these benefits include the following:

**Resources.** A major misconception about diversity initiatives is that they cost a lot of money. Although it is difficult to sustain diversity efforts without an intentional commitment of resources and support, one of the benefits of establishing an ERT is that it harnesses the expertise and talent of existing stakeholders to promote change from within the institution and thus does not cost anything.

**Capacity Building.** A major tenet of diversity and inclusion initiatives is that “diversity is everyone’s business.” To that end, cultural competence is a skill set that should extend beyond the CDO and other diversity officials on campus. ERTs provide a unique hands-on way for participants to develop the capacity to tackle equity issues across the campus.

**Collaboration.** ERTs offer a multidisciplinary approach due to members of the team coming from the various curricular, co-curricular, and administrative divisions of the college. It is important not to underestimate the experiences and expertise that internal and external stakeholders can lend to address issues of equity on campus.

**Engagement.** ERTs allow members of the college to engage in self-guided learning around complex issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion by exploring quantitative, qualitative, and anecdotal data, which in turn supports a culture of evidence for diversity efforts.

**Empowerment.** ERTs can serve as a tool for empowering members of the campus community to assume greater levels of accountability and responsibility for diversity efforts on campus. The more you can enable individuals to take ownership of diversity efforts, the more likely you are to increase the level of trust and participation for this work on campus.

There are a number of factors that you should consider before implementing an ERT initiative at your institution. Be sure to seek institutional support from senior leadership, as doing so will also affect their areas. Make sure you align the work of the ERT with the mission and vision of the institution in order to avoid a duplication of efforts. Furthermore, it is important to establish a clear line of communication about the timeline, outcomes, and process. Finally, consider how to use and account for campus and external stakeholders; this could include involving students and alumni in developing specific ERT initiatives.

CDOs are responsible for fostering environments of inclusive excellence on campuses. However, it is difficult to promote a climate of inclusion unless you are able to first identify and address issues of exclusion. When properly executed, ERTs provide CDOs and higher education leaders with the ability to use existing data, explore opportunities for collaboration and professional development, and create successful evidence-based approaches to achieve greater diversity and inclusion on campus. ●

James A. Felton III is the chief diversity officer at SUNY Cortland. He is also a member of the *INSIGHT Into Diversity* Editorial Board.

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