



Assessing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practices in PLC Program Review Final Report

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Organization	Presidents Leadership Class
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Project Background and Purpose

In September of 2020, PLC contacted Project Deviate seeking support in conducting a review of its operations, as part of a larger effort of ensuring that program activities better align with its values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). After continued struggles to increase the diversity of student cohorts, and feedback from alumni of color about their experiences, PLC noted that racial inequities in particular stood out for PLC as a barrier to student access, belonging, and thriving in the program. Ultimately, PLC hopes to foster a fundamental shift in culture that ensures increased representation and sense of community for minoritized students.

PLC Needs:

1. Conduct a DEI review of existing PLC activities that trace the “lifecycle” of student participation, including recruitment, participation, and alumni engagement
2. Identify issues related to racial equity that serve as barriers to access and participation in PLC
3. Gain a nuanced understanding of PLC’s culture, with an eye towards issues and opportunities implicated in cultivating DEI values moving forward
4. Provide staff with foundational tools to begin concretely addressing issues of DEI and racial equity in PLC programmatic activities

Project Deviate’s listening tour and the following qualitative data report speak to the first three needs above, with two follow-up coaching sessions provided to begin working on the final need around foundational tools and frameworks for addressing DEI in the program.



Method for Data Collection and Analysis

Data Sources – Project Deviate’s listening tour included gathering qualitative data from the sources outlined below. Detailed notes were taken during the focus groups and interviews, and initial reflections were compiled immediately after each session between the facilitator and notetaker.

- **Stakeholder Focus Groups:** 8 focus groups, timed at 75 minutes
 - 5 focus groups with **current students** (one per cohort year and a fifth open group)
 - 2 focus groups for **alumni**
 - 1 focus group for **Board of Advocates members**
- **Professional Staff One-on-one Interviews:** 4 interviews, timed at 60 minutes
- **Document Review:** Review of 22 documents and videos related to PLC’s program (e.g., application materials, interview guides, event flyers, recruitment handbook, student handbook), in addition to a review of the PLC website

Participant Demographics – In total, 56 people participated in the focus group sessions. The following demographic information was collected from participants, in order to provide a snapshot of who attended the focus groups:

- **Stakeholders:** 26% alumni, 57% current students, and 17% Board of Advocates members
- **Gender identity:** 37% male, 61% female, 2% nonbinary
- **Racial identity:** 79% White, 9% Latinx, 5% Black, 5% Asian, 2% Middle Eastern/Arab
- **Sexual identity:** 54% heterosexual, 23% LGBTQ, 23% undisclosed
- **Nationality:** 96% USA, 2% Ugandan, 2% undisclosed,
- **Current student information:**
 - 97% 1st point of entry, 3% 2nd point of entry
 - 68% current or former student staff, 32% non-student staff (current or former)

Data Analysis – Project Deviate compiled the detailed transcript notes taken from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, totaling approximately 74 pages of data (Arial, size 11 font). The documents and media analyzed totaled 97 pages, excluding the content on the PLC website. Project Deviate members individually conducted an initial open coding of the data guided by themes identified in the initial scope of work, including culture, racial equity, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and program areas/activities. In comparing the initial individual coding, Project Deviate consultants next jointly developed axial codes that were then organized into the themes outlined in the findings below.



Findings: Major Themes and Takeaways

Our analysis reveals that marginalized students, including students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students, face particular barriers in participating and belonging in PLC. In addition, many students feel ill-equipped to engage in meaningful conversation on DEI issues, both as they pertain to PLC and in their daily lives. While all PLC stakeholders expressed a desire for PLC to be a leader on campus in DEI, our analysis reveals that key barriers hinder PLC's ability to align its programming, policies, and practices with its stated values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The following takeaways are presented in the spirit of acknowledging PLC's genuine care and concern for students, alumni, staff, faculty, and board members, in seeking to foster a program and environment where all students can learn, thrive, and foster lasting relationships. PLC has also already begun taking important steps in this direction. Far from discounting these efforts, the findings below provide a foundation of understanding from which PLC can build meaningful change in DEI in its community.

Major Takeaways:

- I. **A lack of clarity exists around how PLC defines diversity, equity, and inclusion, and what these terms mean to PLC.**
 - a. When asked to discuss DEI issues and efforts in PLC, two themes emerged in participant responses that suggest a limited view of DEI:
 - i. Defining DEI efforts in terms of **representation** and increasing the diversity of the students in the program.
 - ii. **"Diversity of thought"** and geographic location predominate how many people talk about diversity in PLC. While people acknowledge that a lack of racial diversity is a problem for PLC, the conversation often drifts towards representation of other factors like rural communities and conservative political viewpoints.
 - b. A focus on representation and diversity of thought makes it difficult for PLC to move beyond diversity into issues of inclusion and equity:
 - i. Representation:
 1. People often associate DEI work in PLC with recruitment and selection. Stakeholders acknowledge that PLC should move beyond this to better address inclusion and students' experience in the program.
 - ii. Diversity of thought:
 1. PLC's focus on diversity of thought distracts from more intentionally addressing social identities that have been historically marginalized. This is especially apparent when it comes to intentional and deliberate talk about race and racism.
 2. Framing DEI as diversity of thought dilutes the concept to individual differences, making it difficult for people to engage in



meaningful conversation about entrenched societal inequities that maintain a white, Western, cisheterosexual, economically stable status quo. Relatedly, DEI is often framed alongside political difference, reducing DEI conversations to policy debates and differences in opinion rather than recognizing the lived experiences of marginalized students, staff, alumni, and board members.

- c. A lack of clarity on how PLC defines DEI, and how diversity, equity, and inclusion are meaningful to PLC specifically, creates uncertainty and confusion around PLC's position, vision, and motivations for DEI.
 - i. This contributes to disagreement on what it means for PLC to be a leader on campus in DEI, as well as a deficit of buy-in and drive among stakeholders to get there. At worst, a lack of clarity engenders suspicion and concerns that PLC's actions in DEI are surface level and performative.

II. **Cultural ideals around professionalism and leadership in PLC hinder engagement in DEI.**

- a. Norms concerning what it means to be a PLCer create an implicit "mold" and archetype for leadership and professionalism.
 - i. While PLC materials encourage students in "growing into a leader in an authentic and non-prescribed way," students, staff, and alumni identify that PLC puts forth an ideal or mold that they feel pressured to fit into.
 - ii. The PLC archetype implies someone who is ambitious, high achieving, confident, polished, well-dressed, interesting, eloquent, intelligent, outspoken, open, and extroverted. DEI values are markedly absent from these espoused characteristics.
 - iii. This mold alienates current and former students alike, who cite issues like mental health concerns, isolation, exclusion, and feelings of failure and inadequacy that arise from this struggle and impact engagement with the program.
- b. These PLC norms, along with a culture of professionalism, make it difficult for some students to share their identities and be vulnerable in the PLC community.
 - i. **Sharing identity:** Students withhold parts of their identities in an attempt to maintain an image that aligns with the PLC mold. ("You want to hide parts of your identity so that you fit the archetype.")
 - ii. **Vulnerability:** Participants cited a culture of professionalism as inhibiting displays of vulnerability, emotion, and weakness. ("There's a 'PLC smile' where people act like everything is fine. But everything isn't fine.") This makes engaging in DEI conversations, which implicate questions of identity, embodied emotions, and personal experience, all the more difficult. Although delivered in a spirit of support, discourses of resilience, grit, and "toughening up" aimed at students exacerbate this problem.
- c. Across stakeholders, many identified the professional dress code as both antiquated and alienating for students outside of formal business contexts.



- d. The PLC mold, and cultural norms of leadership and professionalism surrounding it, impact issues of equity:
 - i. Dis/ability is rarely addressed as a DEI issue, and students fear their disability status will be treated as an impairment to achieving leadership and academic success in PLC.
 - ii. Certain students (i.e., white, able-bodied, economically supported) are better able to reach this mold than others. This fosters an inequitable dynamic where students with social identities farther from this mold must exert more effort to identify with and/or perform the role of PLCer.
 - iii. This mold creates assumptions about who is (and is not) a professional, a leader, and a PLCer. In discussions of recruitment across multiple stakeholders, low-income students and students of color are often framed as needing further development to “become” leaders, whereas their white, financially secure counterparts are framed as already leading. This framing perpetuates a deficit model of already marginalized groups.
 - e. Ultimately, cultural norms around leadership and professionalism can inadvertently frame student issues with succeeding in the program as a result of individual “deficiencies” or “problems,” rather than a result of the organizational culture and the policies and practices that directly and indirectly support it.
- III. **Ownership and responsibility for DEI is unclear, fostering frustration, exasperation, and potential animosity for relationships between PLC stakeholders.**
- a. Tension around who drives DEI efforts – staff, students, or board members – creates confusion about roles and responsibilities for DEI in PLC. (“It’s unclear who should be leading this conversation.”)
 - i. This lack of clarity around DEI roles and responsibilities produces uncertainty, frustration, defensiveness, and reactive actions that contribute to a kind of vicious cycle where all parties feel misunderstood and unfairly criticized.
 - ii. As a result, DEI efforts are often marked by antagonism and a feeling of exasperation, draining important organizational energy and drive for engaging and staying in important conversations. This dynamic also winnows down mutual respect and assuming best intentions in relationships between stakeholders.
 - b. Marginalized people often end up bearing disproportionate labor and responsibility for DEI in PLC.
 - i. For example, students of color, who may already expend emotional and intellectual energy maneuvering PLC as a predominantly white space, feel called to bring DEI issues to the attention of the organization when no one else does. If they do so, they are often further charged with solving the problem that they bring to light, and/or educating others (other students and/or staff) on why the issue they have pointed out is a problem. For some, the focus groups initially felt like yet another example of this additional labor.



- ii. PLC's cultural values of respectful, professional, intellectual discourse is often at odds with the emotional labor that many take on in DEI work, and in simply being a person of color in a predominantly white program. Many students of privilege seem to expect a dispassionate, "even playing field" for intellectually debating DEI issues, without acknowledging this additional emotional, intellectual, and time-intensive labor that people of color face. By intellectualizing issues of race and racism, the conversation fails to attend to the lived experiences of students of color for whom this is not just an intellectual or ideological exercise.
- iii. White, straight stakeholders express discomfort in taking on a role in DEI, or feel unsure about what their role should be. This relates to a lack of clarity around how PLC defines DEI (discussed in Section I), and therefore who DEI pertains to, contributing to passiveness among students of privilege and further labor for marginalized students.
- c. Many students of color see themselves as begrudgingly filling a perceived gap in leadership on DEI in PLC, feeling as though they are engaged in a paradox. First, they feel additional responsibility to take initiative in addressing problems as they arise. Second, once they address these problems they are treated as angry, divisive agitators.

IV. Opportunities to compellingly communicate PLC's DEI values and practices, internally and externally, remain underutilized.

- a. Students express confusion around policies and processes for reporting DEI issues that might arise in the program.
- b. Building relationships with organizations on campus or at peer institutions that consistently engage with DEI remains a promising but largely underutilized effort.
- c. Additional opportunities exist for clearly and consistently communicating the value and importance of DEI for PLC, whether that pertain to the classroom, prospective students, relationships with high school programs, interview panels, recitations, staff meetings, the website, student orientation, or the student handbook.
 - i. DEI language on PLC written material seems to lack a common underlying thread that clearly articulates what DEI means for PLC, and how PLC's program areas and activities are explicitly grounded in DEI principles (as outlined in Section I).
- d. A missed opportunity exists in not providing a nuanced understanding of leadership development in relationship to DEI in PLC's curriculum, activities, and partnerships.
 - i. People feel as though DEI efforts are largely ad hoc, reactive, or opt-in, rather than an integral part of the program and leadership development in PLC.
 - ii. Stakeholders acknowledge that DEI is an increasingly critical skill that they will need in their careers and lives following their undergraduate degree.



- iii. Participants note that conversations explicitly about DEI for the most part do not happen in PLC, and when they do, people are largely ill-equipped and inexperienced in navigating the discussion and the discomfort that often accompanies it.

Concluding Remarks

As a culmination of Project Deviate’s fall 2020 listening tour, this report has outlined critical takeaways that we believe will be vital for PLC to consider in furthering its efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our listening tour and findings provide a snapshot of the organization, with the understanding that these conversations will continue to change and evolve in PLC. After speaking with thoughtful and caring people at all levels of the organization, we feel confident that PLC can take meaningful steps in rising to this occasion.