

The DEI Question in Administrative Job Interviews

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Candidates interviewing for administrative positions this year at colleges and universities will almost certainly be asked some version of the “DEI question”: What accomplishments have you achieved to advance your values of diversity, equity, and inclusion?

That is challenging to answer, regardless of your title, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or disability. How do you even begin to discuss such an important, complicated, and timely subject within the awkward and artificial context of a job interview — especially when it’s further complicated by being conducted virtually?

Answering in a meaningful way is not a matter of mastering the most up-to-date lingo or checking the right boxes. In 2021, institutions are looking for candidates who have clearly defined DEI values and who are living up to them in real and significant ways.

Truth is, there is no cheat sheet for the DEI question. But there are clear steps you can take to make sure that your answer is authentic, compelling, and fully captures the impact of the work you’ve already done on this front and what you plan to do if hired for this new role. Having observed hundreds of job interviews — one of us as an executive-search consultant and the other as a senior vice president at a large university — we have found that three relatively simple steps can help you prepare your own personal “best” response to this vital question.

Step No. 1: Write out your personalized definition of DEI. You can’t speak compellingly about an abstraction;

you need to pin down what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean to you and why they matter. At the places you’ve worked and at the campus where you’re interviewing, think critically about the specific contexts and the most pressing issues related to DEI. Reflect on how your own life experience has shaped and influenced your understanding of the importance of DEI.

As groundwork, write out a personal “diversity statement” outlining the values you hold and why. It’s becoming common for hiring institutions to ask candidates for a diversity statement — keep one handy. A strong statement mixes discussion of your personal and philosophical goals with concrete descriptions of how your values contribute to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace. Whenever possible, link your values to measurable outcomes and data. If you don’t have such metrics to share from past work experience, focus instead on developing specific proposals for your new role (see Step No. 2).

Even if you have not been asked for a diversity statement, consider submitting one anyway. So long as you’ve written a good statement — and run it by trusted mentors — there is virtually no downside to communicating your DEI commitments.

- **Tip: Know your history.** This work does not occur in a vacuum. Including examples of past reforms and reformers in your diversity statement is a simple but powerful way to demonstrate both the breadth of your knowledge and the depth of your values. Contextualize

your DEI definition within historical moments that excite and inspire you, and invoke the legacy of trailblazers who have inspired campus, statewide, or national policy standards. In one interview we observed, for example, a dean candidate shared how she was influenced by [Marian Wright Edelman](#), the first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar and the founder and 47-year president of the Children's Defense Fund. Last summer, at 81 years old, Edelman took to the streets to protest police brutality after the killing of George Floyd. Her lifelong commitment to justice, this candidate said, helped her remember that DEI work is a marathon, not a sprint. She said it also prompted her to think deeply about how to stay energized and passionate in this work over the course of decades — which is the kind of dedication hiring committees are looking for now.

Step No. 2: Be specific. When considering how best to present your record in an interview setting, it's helpful to think backward from the end goal. Remember: Your ultimate DEI leadership responsibility is to create an environment where diverse talent can thrive and go on to improve the institution at large. What actions have you taken as a leader to help make that goal a reality?

Too often, candidates cite their hiring statistics as the ultimate example of their commitment to DEI. But while recruiting and retaining a diverse labor pool is an important step to realizing DEI goals, it's not enough in and of itself. Dig deeper. Are you encouraging colleagues, external partners, and students of all backgrounds to embrace DEI and invite productive disagreement? Are you lifting up the voices of underrepresented and marginalized groups on campus and asking others to embrace inevitably uncomfortable conversations? Are you disrupting entrenched systems of inequality or merely papering over them?

In other words, the most effective responses to the DEI question use narrow metrics — such as hiring statistics — as just a starting point. And it is an important one; data matters, always. But it's equally important to include examples of actions you've taken — or detailed plans you

would pursue if hired — that go above and beyond statistical parity to help create the thriving, diverse environment that is the end goal of DEI work.

Every candidate's leadership practice will be different, of course, so we can't tell you exactly what to say. But here's an example that we found particularly compelling: A candidate for a fund-raising position explained how formal mentoring is not only a proven method of building an experienced diverse senior team, it's also a strategy with rewards that compound over time. This candidate said that her efforts to coach diverse members of her team to take on more senior roles ended up aiding her external hiring because diverse candidates are often looking for a well-functioning senior team that is already diverse. In other words, a thoughtful mentorship program can have a DEI domino effect on an institution. By matching talent to opportunities, you are, in turn, refashioning your institution into a future magnet for top diverse talent.

- **Tip: Budgets tell a story about priorities.** Don't let your balance sheet undermine your interview. Even if DEI is not a direct line item in your budget, your spending framework includes DEI decisions, and you should be carefully tracking that data. Covid-19 has turned higher-education budgets upside down at a time when the demand for investment in DEI has peaked. Be prepared to share examples of how you've financially supported DEI in the midst of an exceptionally tough budget cycle. Don't forget to look to the future, as well. Strong candidates will demonstrate that they've already begun to think seriously about how to prioritize DEI in the last stages of the pandemic and beyond. A good place to start is to focus on your most important asset: your employees. Consider the [disproportional challenges](#) of the pandemic on marginalized groups, including people with illnesses, disabilities, and caretakers. How would you invest campus resources to deal with such challenges? If budget reductions are unavoidable, how would you ensure they are carried out fairly from a DEI perspective?

Step No. 3: Clearly map out an authentic theory of change. The last thing the academic world needs is another empty administrative statement. In 2021, it's more likely than not that your institution has already released some kind of mission statement related to DEI work — but that doesn't mean it's making a difference. In fact, the Harvard Kennedy School has an entire program, the Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project, dedicated to studying the efficacy of diversity initiatives.

As a candidate, you can stand out from the crowd by coming to your interview prepared with a well-reasoned, detailed, and convincing theory of change — essentially an analysis of the DEI changes you reasonably expected to see as a result of a given strategy (or strategies), and why. A big reason why many DEI programs fail is because they didn't clearly articulate a theory of change. Ideally, the theory you articulate as a candidate will serve as a connection between your DEI values and your DEI leadership practice. If your values are what you believe and your practice is what you are doing, your theory of change is why you are doing it.

Let's return to the example we shared about the compounding rewards of a good mentoring program. This candidate realized that well-qualified diverse applicants tend to prefer to work at institutions that already have thriving diverse staffs — external hiring alone was not the solution here. Instead, by focusing on developing the diverse talent already on staff, she and her institution were able to break the cycle and become more attractive to both internal and external candidates. New actions created a new outcome — their theory of change worked.

- **Tip: You don't have to confine your outlook to campus.** Especially early in your career, you may find it easier to root your theory of change in evidence you've observed outside of work. Think of times when public speaking, lobbying, organizing, or any other form of advocacy made a sustained difference in your community — and then analyze what worked and why. For example, a candidate being interviewed for an administrative post in finance pointed to three specific trends in state laws that were making hiring processes in academe fairer: bans on asking someone's

prior salary, legislation on pay equity, and hair laws (which declare natural hair “professional” and help support cultural diversity in the workplace). The scope of each of those laws was narrow, but taken together, they significantly leveled the playing field for many applicants. Breaking down DEI issues into multiple small, separate opportunities for advocacy can lead to modest reforms that complement and build on one another. That's a compelling example of a theory of change.

Many leaders value diversity, equity, and inclusion but are too intimidated to engage deeply with it. They fear making a misstep. But the DEI question requires humility, honesty, and bravery. Brave leaders model how to take responsibility for failures and disclose their own shortcomings. In your interview, it's more than OK to both delineate specific methods to achieve DEI progress and cite your mistakes along the way. You might inspire others to look inward.

How you answer this question has the potential to do much more than just help or hurt your interview. By thinking critically about, and engaging earnestly with, the DEI question, you are helping advance an important conversation that may create better, healthier institutions for everyone.

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