Engineering Systems and Environment  
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee  

Summary and Response to DEI Related Emails from 6/6/20 – 6/16/20

The purpose of the summary is to recap the comments on DEI matters shared by the ESE community via open email dialog, confidential emails to the DEI committee, anonymous surveys, one-on-one forums, and open forums. It will also present actions that the committee proposes in response to requests for action by the ESE community. After reviewing community responses to these proposals, the DEI committee will work with department leadership and the ESE community to take the necessary steps to implement the proposed actions. The committee will provide periodic updates to the ESE community on its progress. For this reporting period there were no forums hosted by the DEI committee.

Summary of Responses

Approximately [16] members of our community shared their views on issues of racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and injustice via the department-wide email exchange. Another [6] members used the anonymous survey and [3] members used direct confidential email to members of the DEI committee.

The messages revealed strong feelings of hurt, confusion, isolation, guilt, and desire to improve. Many respondents took the time to draft extensive, well-organized remarks that included links to various resources. The volume and emotional intensity of the email exchanges indicates that members of our community feel strongly that ESE, SEAS, UVA, and society in general, have failed, and continue to fail, at achieving true diversity, equity, inclusivity, and justice. This failure has and continues to inflict the greatest hurt and burden on the black community.

From the publicly-shared responses, there was consensus that the very small numbers of Black students, faculty, and staff in our department will make it effectively impossible for them to offer truly anonymous feedback. Several respondents suggested that anonymous feedback should therefore be taken off the table and all comments be made openly.

Many members of our community feel strongly that the onus to improve DEI in ESE should be on non-Black persons. Non-Black members of our community need to respect and honor the heavy emotional toll that Black students, faculty, and staff carry as part of their daily routines.

Many of the comments articulated an urgent need to continue the ongoing open dialog and move forward with real concrete changes in the near-term. Many respondents also expressed their strong desire to maintain momentum beyond “striking while the iron is hot”. Several graduate students expressed their impatience with what they perceive to be an outdated notion of what rate of change is realistically achievable. It is important for the department to focus on timing, consistency, and accountability.
There was some discussion of applying an engineering or systems analysis framework as means to guide our efforts. There is strong desire to select meaningful metrics that we can work towards as a community in the near and longer-term future.

Several concrete actions were proposed:

- continued/enhanced funding for Black graduate students [and also faculty and staff?];
- ensuring resources and support (financial, emotional, logistical, etc.) to support the work of Professor Louis and the DEI committee;
- enhanced recruitment efforts (with emphasis on emotional support [mentorship?];
- seeking perspectives from diverse guest speakers (e.g., our former chair Professor Nicholas Garber);
- and establishment of culturally-sensitive STEM-based outreach activities for the Black community in Charlottesville (e.g., K-12 schools).
- Some graduate students would welcome the opportunity to incorporate anti-racism into their research [and coursework?].
- Finally, several members of our community have referenced the list of demands circulated by UVA’s BSA as a way to brainstorm what steps ESE can take to make internal change and help advocate for external change.

Summary of Suggested Actions & DEI Proposals for Action

1. Encourage the faculty and graduate students to start pursuing diversity recruitment efforts. An independent recruitment chair needs to be appointed and tasked with this.
   
   a. The DEI committee has appointed a recruitment, retention, and advancement subcommittee. Membership will be announced in the next committee report. The subcommittee will solicit recommendations for programs, metrics, and activities from the ESE community.

2. Initiatives without funding fall short, therefore, we implore you (DEI Committee & ESE Department leadership) to create a fellowship fund for Black students in Virginia wanting to attend graduate school. Start with the ESE department and change that racist image by hosting events for students of color from the community to visit ESE to see our research and ways that the Charlottesville Black community, and generally people of color can become a part of it.

   a. The DEI committee is recommending to the department leadership that funds be allocated to support at least two ESE graduate fellowships so that new students may be recruited together in an attempt to reduce the sense of isolation they may feel upon arriving, perhaps for the first time, at a predominantly white institution.

   b. The DEI committee has appointed a community programming and outreach subcommittee. Membership will be announced in the next committee report. The
subcommittee will solicit recommendations for programs, metrics, and activities from the ESE community.

3. Push the faculty to create funding opportunities for students that include racial equality themes in their research, e.g. correcting racism in decision-making software in US hospitals (see Nature link) and support these efforts openly.
   a. The DEI committee will present this request to the ESE faculty and solicit recommendations for implementing it.

4. Pay your faculty of color (i.e. Professor Louis) for their work and efforts to address social justice on behalf of the department and make this a permanent position.
   a. Prof. Louis receives a financial supplement on top of his regular salary for his role as Director of Diversity and Inclusion for ESE.

5. Push faculty to consider the challenges that underprivileged undergraduates face in the classroom, especially in comparison to their more privileged peers. Our new digital prowess as a result of the pandemic may offer solutions in this area.
   a. The DEI committee will present this request to the faculty and offer to host open forums with students as well as with invited speakers to educate our community and implement this request. We will ask the ESE community to participate in developing activities and metrics to chart our progress in this action.

6. Working directly with HBCUs as a whole for recruitment or working to merge with VSU engineering like Prof Lambert suggests, would both be a great way to specifically encourage Black engineers to consider UVa for a graduate program.
   a. The DEI committee will present this request to the faculty and ask for suggestions and volunteers to implement it. We will seek participation from the ESE community in developing metrics to chart our progress in achieving this action.

7. Provide avenues and support for efforts by students to engage with local K-12 schools to “prime the pipeline” of students, especially students of color, who know about and eventually enter ESE.
   a. The DEI community programming and outreach subcommittee would like to discuss suggestions for programs, activities and metrics with students, staff, and faculty to take deliberate and sustained action on this suggestion.

8. Provide avenues for and support efforts by students to engage with the Charlottesville community.
   a. The DEI community programming and outreach subcommittee would like to discuss suggestions for programs, activities and metrics with students, staff, and faculty to take deliberate and sustained action on this suggestion.

9. Address concerns about racial bias toward Chinese students in the recent email exchanges in response to Prof. Pindera’s email to Ciarra Horne and Katelyn Stenger’s response to Prof. Pindera.
a. Graduate student Zhelong He, on behalf of six other students, sent an email on 20-06-12, to the ESE faculty requesting that the ESE department officially support Prof. Pindera in the matter of these email exchanges. They also requested that the department acknowledge its support for the equality of students of all races as it responds to issues of inequality facing black students in the light of the most recent trauma in the black community and its ongoing aftermath. Members of the DEI committee met with Zhelong He and his group on 20.06.23.

i. The DEI committee members stressed its commitment to neutrality in the email exchanges in order to allow for the free and open sharing of opinions. The DEI committee does not plan to regulate this forum except for abuses that violate university policies on use of its resources. We acknowledge that the exchanges can be harsh, impolite, and may even be viewed as disrespectful at times. However, we believe that this may be a consequence of the free exchange of opinions needed to assess where we really are as a community of people in ESE.

ii. Because of its views in item (i), the DEI committee did not deem it appropriate to make a statement in support of Prof. Pindera in this matter.

iii. The DEI committee members reaffirmed its commitment to and unwavering support for the equality of all students, regardless of race.

iv. The DEI committee referred the request by Zhelong He and his colleagues to the Center for Diversity in Engineering. It’s director, Dr. Jason Jones, agreed to meet, on a voluntary basis, with Zhelong and his colleagues, as well as with Katelyn Stenger and Prof. Pindera (both named in Zhelong’s email) in order to resolve their request. This process is currently in progress.

We welcome suggestions from our community for specific actions to implement items from the list of demands circulated by UVA’s BSA, referenced above.

The DEI committee is committed to a transparent, participatory and iterative approach to achieving our vision of a truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive ESE. The committee’s mission statement and call for recommendations on the ESE’s vision for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will be announced shortly.

Respectfully submitted by Garrick Louis. Chair of the ESE DEI committee. 20.06.23.