

## WHAT WE DO MATTERS: FOSTERING INCLUSION AND BELONGING IN THE WORKPLACE

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### ABSTRACT

Initiatives around the world are being implemented in an effort to foster and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in universities, work environments, and beyond. Using DEI as their foundation, courses and studies have been developed which discuss the importance of employee and student engagement and belonging in these settings as well. There are small changes which leaders can implement that may lead to big impacts surrounding DEI, engagement, and belonging both for team members and for the people they serve.

### RESUMEN

Se están implementando iniciativas en todo el mundo en un esfuerzo por fomentar y promover la diversidad, la equidad y la inclusión (DEI) en universidades, entornos laborales y más allá. Usando DEI como base, se han desarrollado cursos y estudios que discuten la importancia del compromiso y la pertenencia de los empleados y estudiantes también en estos entornos. Hay pequeños cambios que los líderes pueden implementar y que conducen a grandes impactos en torno a DEI, compromiso y pertenencia, tanto para los miembros del equipo como para las personas a las que sirven.

*Key Words:* inclusive astronomy — sociology astronomy

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Many courses and publications explore diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and their importance within organizations (Garg & Sangwan 2021(@). Inclusive practices, which may consist of using all-inclusive language, structures, and policies, have been shown to enhance relationships and increase individual and organizational performance (Stevens et al. 2008). This is one reason why we often see engagement efforts, which go hand-in-hand with managing team morale, being highlighted in DEI work.

DEI efforts can have a vast effect within an organization and the initiatives also impact the personal lives of the people involved. For example, DEI efforts can help alleviate the dramatic effects of loneliness. In this case, DEI work can be a matter of life and death as loneliness is associated with an increased risk of heart disease, dementia, depression, and even premature death (Murthy 2020). And while people of any age, race, ethnicity, or sex can unfortunately experience suicide risk, we see that sexual and gender minorities are at a higher risk and have substantially higher rates of suicide than the general U.S. population (Brooks et al. 2020), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). DEI work plays a role in responding to and preventing these issues while helping give people the permission to be their

authentic selves in a way that supports belongingness. In turn, a true sense of belonging can open up new avenues for connection and improve a persons self-worth (Brown 2012).

It is my hope that this paper will play a small role in helping to move us beyond the discussion of why DEI is important. We are at the point where explaining why DEI initiatives are useful can actually hinder the very progress which the efforts aspire to achieve. Instead, outlining structural changes and time-based practices is vital, as expressed in the 2020 publication, *When Words Do Not Matter: Identifying Actions to Effect Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy*. This 2020 report describes everyday practices that, when applied consistently and with repetition, are effective in creating an inclusive culture and climate (Ballard, Dawna et al. 2020). This highlights the sentiment that DEI work is not a “one and done” thing, but an everyday effort and commitment (Winters 2020). Therefore, I will later provide some actionable steps which one can take in their daily lives to promote DEI and foster engagement and belonging in their environments.

### 2. DEFINITIONS

Language is fluid it develops and changes over time and words can take on different meanings depending on what setting they are used in. This can lead to misunderstandings and negatively impact the discus-

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sions we have around DEI. Because a lack of information can lead to assumptions and hinder progress, it is important to define terms thoroughly and often in DEI work. Therefore, I will define just a few of the terms that are seen in DEI and are discussed in this paper. Note that most of the definitions below are from eCornell (2018). As the program focuses on DEI in the workplace, many of the definitions reflect this by incorporating “team” or “organization” into the definition.

As explained in the eCornell (2018) certificate materials, diversity is “the characteristics that describe differences among people; they include demographic characteristics, such as gender and race, ethnicity, age, national origin, religion, disability status, and sexual orientation, and deeper level characteristics, such as people’s personalities, their values, the things that they’re passionate about, their personal interests.” Note that this definition includes the diversity of thought the difference in ideas, perspectives, and values present within a group.

Defined by UC Berkeley Center for Equity, Inclusion and Diversity Strategic Plan (2009), equity is the “fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all ... while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. The principle of equity acknowledges that there are historically underserved and underrepresented populations and that fairness regarding these unbalanced conditions is needed to assist equality in the provision of effective opportunities to all groups.”

Inclusion is explained as, “a relational construct; ultimately it is about how your team functions and performs based on the quality of social connections, openness to learning, agility and depth of decision making. It is focused on synergistic interpersonal processes that make it possible for diverse groups to yield performance benefits for their organization” (eCornell 2018).

There exist many terms used throughout DEI work, far too many to cover in this paper. Instead, I will focus on just a few additional terms: engagement, or “an individuals sense of purpose and focused energy, evident to others in the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort, and persistence directed toward organizational goals;” psychological safety, which is “the shared belief that team members are safe for interpersonal risk taking and personal expression. Individuals within an organization should be able to show themselves and share their opinions without fear of negative consequences of status within the organization;” and belongingness, or “the

feeling that a person has that [they are] a valued part of the group” (eCornell 2018).

One final word that I feel is important to also define here is permission. This is “the act of allowing someone to do something, or of allowing something to happen” (2022). Note that this use of permission is not in reference to sexual consent, rather it is the permission given to others so that they feel free to be their wholehearted selves. Perhaps this is too common or “basic” a word to define as I have never come across it in DEI glossaries, but the concept of permission has played an important role in my own life and work. Most importantly, in my experience, I have found that it is one of the first steps in fostering DEI, engagement, and belonging (Thompson et al. 2018).

### 3. INITIATIVES IN ASTRONOMY

DEI initiatives have become commonplace in strategic planning efforts for many fields, including astronomy. When looking at the number of articles, reports, and other materials that reference DEI in Astronomy, Google Scholar results show a general increase over the past 21 years (Fig. 1). For the year 2000, the number of search results were at 197 and in 2021 they were at 1190, an increase of 993 results in 21 years.

Since Google Scholar is not comprehensive in its findings, it is important to make use of a number of databases. For comparison, we can use the digital library portal for researchers in astronomy and physics the SAO/NASA Astrophysics Data System (ADS). Using ADS, there is also a general increase in search results for DEI for the years 2018-2021, compared to the years 2000-2017 (Fig. 2). The largest number of results for DEI were shown for 2020 at 87. Note that the searches presented 10 or fewer results for each of the years 2000-2015. Additionally, the number of results here are much smaller than the numbers seen with Google Scholar. This is interesting to consider when thinking about ways in which the community of astronomers and physicists can improve DEI efforts.

One must also consider that an increase of search results may be commonplace over the past 21 years of scholarly work, and perhaps this trend is seen for astronomy publications in general. To compare, we can look at the number of search results for “Astronomy” using Google Scholar (Fig. 3) as well as ADS (Fig. 4). Although there was a general increase for search results from Google Scholar from the year 2000 to 2012 with 56800 to 148000 results, respectively, the number of results then decreased until

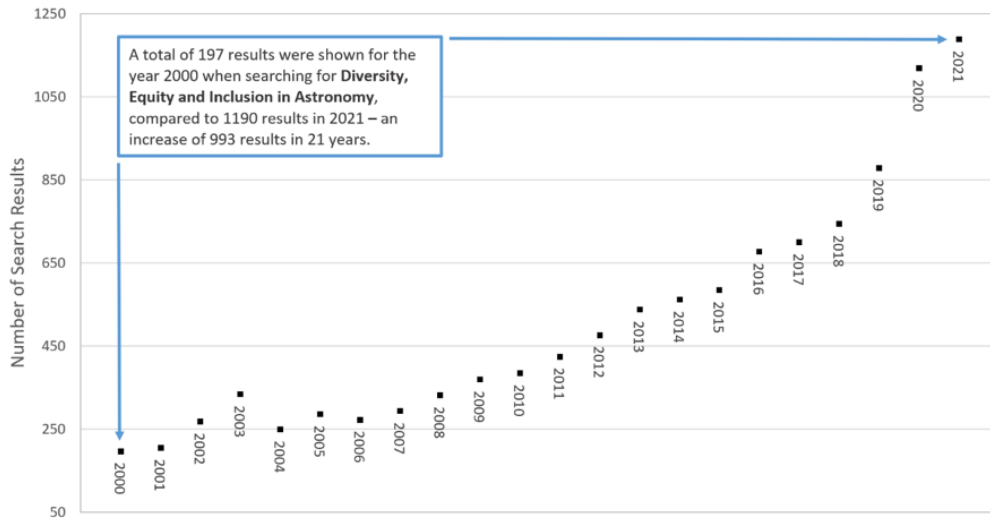


Fig. 1. Search results for diversity, equity, and inclusion in Astronomy from Google Scholar over 21 years.

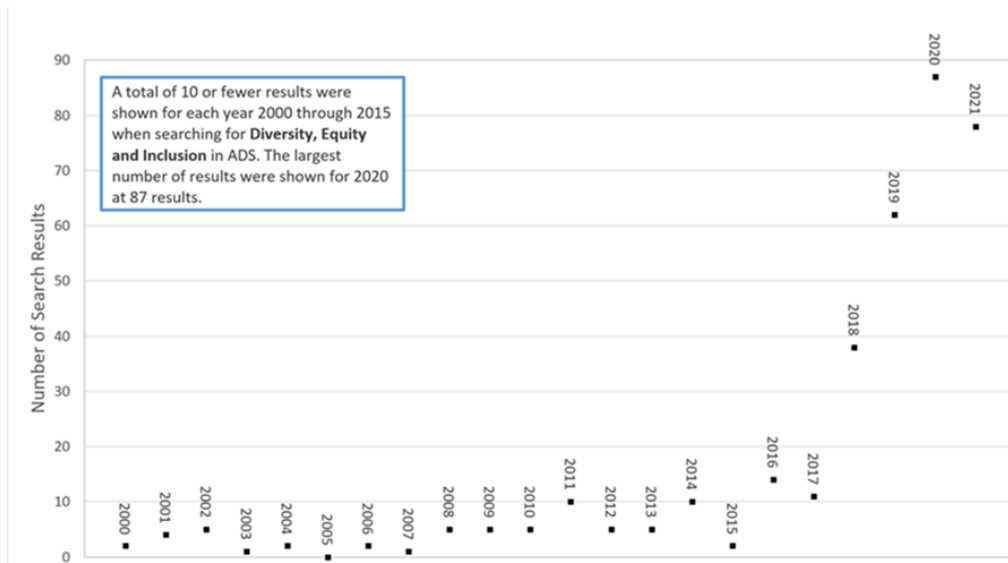


Fig. 2. Search results for diversity, equity, and inclusion in Astronomy from ADS over 21 years.

they reached a low point in 2021 at 46200 results. Results using ADS generally increased from 3943 in the year 2000 until 5462 in the year 2010, an increase of 1519 results. The number of results then generally decreased after this until there was another peak in 2021 at 5402 results.

The increase of search results for “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Astronomy” compared to “Astronomy” over the past 21 years does suggest an increase in DEI initiatives in astronomy. Note that the quantity of search results for DEI in astronomy does not necessarily suggest quality and there are nuances involved in both databases that I will not go into in this short paper.

The publication results for DEI in astronomy range from affiliations in the UK and Italy (Jermak, Lucatello & Woods 2018) to discussing diversity and inclusion in Australian astronomy (Kewley 2019) to diving into astronomy networks and best practices for inclusion in Japan (Usuda-Sato, Mineshige & Canas 2019). This wide-range of initiatives around the globe further highlights the impact of DEI work in astronomy.

Furthermore, the importance of DEI is seen by members of the science communication community as well. The 2021 International Planetarium Society (IPS) Culture and Climate Survey Report showed that 76.2% of planetarians felt that the IPS should be taking on the responsibility to promote DEI in the field. Looking at the data closer, different subgroups responded in unique ways. For example, respondents ages 70 or older were less likely to agree that IPS should be taking on this role (~70%). On the other side of the age-range, respondents under the age of 45 were more likely to agree that IPS should be taking on this role at approximately 86% (Schmoll, Thompson & LeBlanc 2021).

#### 4. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The policies and procedures put into place at organizations are aids that help to ensure DEI work is upheld on a daily basis, eliminating barriers and providing a space that nurtures an individuals psychological safety. For some concrete examples, as co-chair of the IPS Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Standing Committee, I co-led the creation and implementation of a new Code of Conduct and accompanying grievance procedure (International Planetarium Society Code of Conduct 2020), created a Conference Site Assessment Toolkit (International Planetarium Society Conference Site Assessment Toolkit 2020), created a confidential web-based mechanism for members to report concerns and incidents (International Planetarium Society Suggestions 2020),

created and implemented a non-disclosure agreement for IPS Leadership, removed the gender-specific language from the IPS By-laws and Standing Rules, and more. These steps are just some ways in which an organization can show its dedication to DEI, and more importantly, their dedication to the very unique individuals they serve.

To help teams and individuals make a meaningful impact, organizations often create goals, objectives, and strategic imperatives to help guide their work. Organizational goals are often outlined in an extensive DEI Strategic Plan, sometimes called an Inclusive Excellence Plan, where inclusive excellence is the commitment to “respect and embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion in people, ideas, and opinions.” DEI strategic plans generally outline objectives for each goal listed in an effort to recruit, support, and retain a diverse population of active and engaged team members, affiliates, and leaders.

At my home institution, Ball State University, leadership published their first plan in 2019. The 2019-2024 Inclusive Excellence Plan can be summarized as a commitment to:

- Recruit, support, and retain a diverse population of students, faculty, and staff.
- Encourage and reward diversity of thought.
- Promote a work environment that encourages and rewards innovation and creativity.
- Keep inclusive excellence at the highest level of institutional importance and as a foundation in all that we strive to do (Ball State University 2019).

An early draft of the Ball State Inclusive Excellence Plan helped inform the creation of the one for the IPS. The IPS plan is structured around five goals: Culture and Climate of Inclusion; Inclusive Policies and Systems; Inclusive Conferences and Events; Recruitment and Retention for an Inclusive Organization; and Professional Development for Inclusive Excellence. The plan further describes objectives which ensure commitment to DEI is being upheld and specific milestones are being reached over time.

#### 5. PRACTICES

Beyond overarching policies and procedures, daily practices are also necessary in promoting and fostering an inclusive culture and climate in work environments. Materials from eCornells Improving Engagement course offer a few basic needs that employees

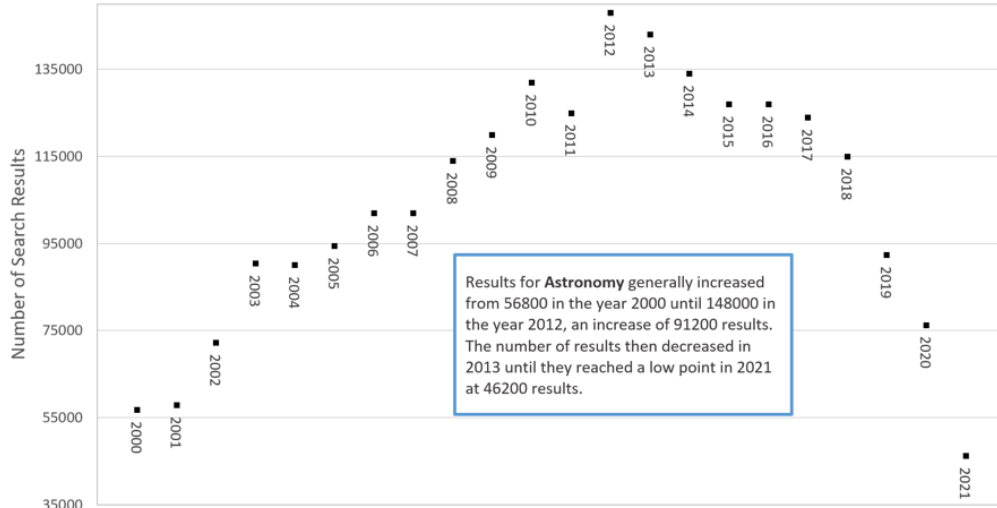


Fig. 3. Search results for Astronomy from Google Scholar over 21 years.

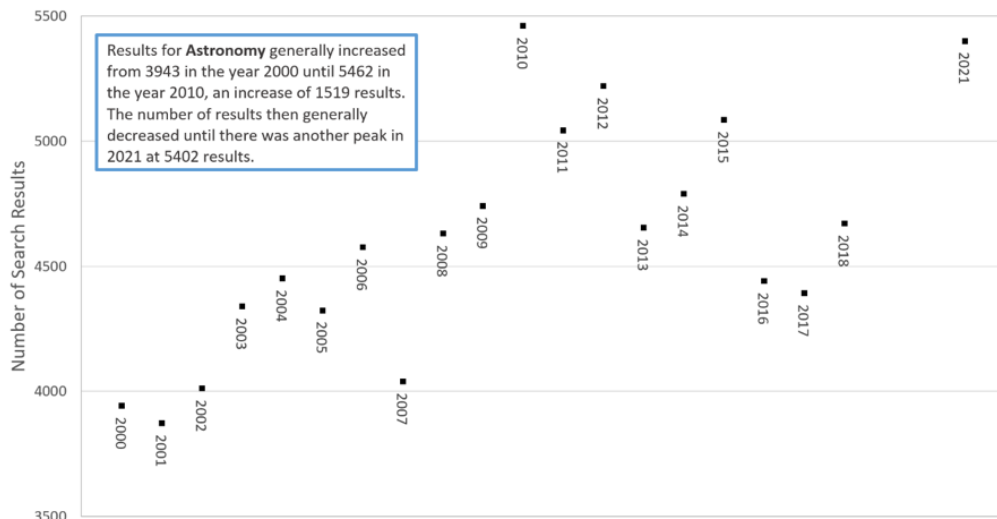


Fig. 4. Search results for Astronomy from ADS over 21 years.

require in order to be engaged in their work. Specifically, they suggest that people need to perceive “that they are part of something significant with coworkers they trust” and that they need to be “emotionally connected to others.” These examples rely on a person’s psychological safety—specifically whether or not a person can “show themselves and share their opinions without fear of negative consequences of status within the organization” (2018).

While a code of conduct is one tool that helps encourage inclusive behaviors, there are specific actions that can be demonstrated by leaders when working with individuals one-on-one or in a group setting. Perhaps overlapping with policy, it is good practice to also implement and practice the meeting guidelines. Here are ones that I have used in my work:

- Be mindful with your words and actions; exercise good judgment and character
- Approach situations and conversations with an open mind
- Be aware that your assumptions may impact others
- Give others the chance to speak
- Accept that others’ lives and experiences are different from your own
- Accept that others’ boundaries (emotional, physical, etc.) may be different from your own
- Practice patience and empathy, and provide opportunities to make amends where appropriate

By reviewing these guidelines on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis, I have found that conversations are more productive as everyone is reminded that they are permitted by leadership to be themselves, make mistakes, and be leaders of inclusion themselves without fear of retaliation. Additionally, these points help to remind everyone—including myself—that their everyday actions can and do affect others.

Guidelines are a great first step to helping people trust each other while feeling psychologically safe, but they do little to help people feel emotionally connected to one another. One way to do this is to celebrate the unique characteristics and skills that they bring to the team. The popular “warm fuzzies” activity is one practice that can help with this. This is where students or team members write anonymous notes to their peers complimenting them on one or more of the individuals’ characteristics. These

compliments are about personal attributes, beyond a simple complement of an outfit, etc. The goals or take-aways of the exercise are to promote team bonding, help increase individuals’ self-awareness and self-concept, help those writing the compliments verbalize positive personal attributes, and have fun.

This is just one of many team bonding activities that are worth implementing that can have a deep impact on the work environment. For additional resources, I would suggest these two articles from reputable online sources that dive into more organizational practices: *Belonging: Co-creating welcoming and equitable museums* (Bonnici 2019), which is appropriate for those working in museums or science communication centers and endeavor to offer inclusive events and exhibits, and *The Value of Belonging at Work* (Carr et al. 2019).

## 6. CONCLUSION

There are many sources and activities out there to consider when working towards fostering DEI, inclusion, and belonging in your environments; all of which I urge you to approach with an open mind. When doing so, remember that these resources are tools that you can add to your toolkit and use when appropriate, but note that not all may be the right tool for you and your personality. Instead, I encourage you to find the tools that feel natural to you and compliment your skillset. After all, if we are working towards fostering inclusion and belonging in our work behaviors that permit and encourage a person to be their authentic selves—we ourselves must be authentic in what we do and say as leaders. As author and researcher Brené Brown has said, “True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are” (2019). Remember this as you move forward in your work.

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