ADEI Statement, Brad Johnson

Accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) collectively make up a set of ideas, concepts, challenges, and opportunities that are amongst the most important to and for higher education in general, Western in particular, and to each of us individually. The prompt for this statement asks for a description of my prior work and how my experience can contribute to Western’s mission. Likely, my answer should be straightforward and simple, but my experiences are not, as they involve an array of experiences at different levels, encompassing different components of the challenges and opportunities associated with ADEI work. I will certainly provide a detailed description of my approaches to ADEI work as a college administrator, but to more fully describe what the work and the process represents to me—and my perspective regarding the position of Provost—I will construct my overall statement within three primary contexts. The first is personal; here I mean my own experiences and social constructs as part of my life and career, as well as the general role that personal-level ideology plays in approaching ADEI work and issues. The second is institutional, to include the mission and vision of WWU, as well as the more pragmatic—what sorts of challenges specifically exist at Western and what events and changes have taken and are taking place, and what role I have played and what observations I can make about the ADEI landscape at WWU. The last is broad context regarding the place and role of higher education, the social and cultural pressures on institutions, and some of the ideas that have evolved as a result. In general terms, accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion are individual provisions that, in turn, encompass a significant array of frameworks, such as advancing culture, hiring practice, and inclusive teaching and research. In what follows, I will do my best to speak to each with clarity and alacrity, and hopefully with enough examples to provide what I think is important and why.

It is helpful to paraphrase one of the fundamental ADEI precepts common to the many organizations and skilled individuals I have encountered: when trying to move towards a destination, it is a necessary step to understand where you are starting from. This is true not only of organizations or groups, but also (rather acutely) for individuals. I therefore begin with a brief description of my own path. As a cis-gendered white male, born in the U.S., I acknowledge the privilege of being raised as a member of the dominant culture, to include the privileges within a particular sub-culture, and the worldview associated with such an upbringing. Although I was born and raised in Colorado, during the mid-1960s I lived for a time in central Florida, and experienced—from the point of view of a young white child—the explicit racial segregation of that time and place. The many signals of the surrounding systemic racism left important images in my consciousness, but as with many lower-middle class white families of the time, what I saw and experienced was not actively discussed in context or explained to me. As a young person I experienced a common socialization within my sub-community, wherein racial discrimination was ‘wrong,’ but which also included the problematic ‘treating race itself as not important’ mantra as a path towards racial equity (as well as other difficult tropes such as the essential equality of meritocracy). While a student—and particularly as a graduate student—I was also very aware of the gender imbalance of my field. The Ph.D.
program in theoretical physics that I attended, as well as my post-doctoral fellowship program, were overwhelmingly male-gendered; we did discuss this obvious problem as a community, and there was some burgeoning thought about causes and effects—I had listened intentionally to activists and seen the evidence for structural issues—and as a result I began to self-examine more earnestly: what role do I play, and how do I play it? When I began my first tenure-track appointment at UNM, I had the opportunity to work with an individual whose research was focused on the paths of young girls in physical science; more specifically, they examined the driving effects of structured stereotyping and bias that persist even after mitigation. As a result of this more intensive work, I began to acquire more effective tools for genuine, better-informed self-reflection. This was important for me, as it altered my positionality and cultivated fertile ground for a growth mindset, leading to more penetrative future experiences, which in turn have—I hope—helped me to better listen to the lived experiences of others and connect current structural inequity to a chain of past structures. I was not, and am not, a subject matter expert, to be sure; but the collective self-work along the way has helped me to work collaboratively, to identify personal bias, to listen empathetically, and to be able to clearly recognize the moral imperatives of equity of opportunity, support, and just outcomes across institutional constructions and across the many intersecting dimensions of diverse people.

The previous paragraph was not intended as a (possibly naïve) boastful self-promotion (or worse, platitudinous), and I hope it did not communicate in that way; rather, I hope it provides a slightly more nuanced milieu and a sense that, for me, a deeper self-awareness plays a significant role in any broader contexts, which in turn informs action and leadership in the ADEI space. Along my path at WWU I have participated in many workshops, trainings, and other professional development, and have also learned from myriad on-the-ground experiences on both personal and professional planes.

In my various roles at Western, I have worked collaboratively to participate in positive change (however incremental at times) focused on reducing barriers and increasing opportunity for underserved and underrepresented students, and to focus efforts on recruiting and supporting a more diverse faculty and staff. In particular, in my role as dean, I have had the privilege to work with many dedicated individuals—faculty, staff, and students—on a broad range of ideas. Some of these will be elucidated next.

The ADEI activities that I have either lead directly or collaborated to put into place and resource fall into three broad operational categories: Policy, including procedures and processes; Professional Development, including cultural literacy, mentoring, and pedagogy; and Communication, Facilitation, and Resource Connection. My own vision, and current work in the college, is focused on better integration of all three of these operational functions, which have been developed more-or-less independently by different groups and operated mostly without effective horizontal integration. I do believe that this lack of integration is a part of the evolution of an organization like CSE and Western, but forward motion does require intentional work to prevent duplication, to create more effective communication and support, and to facilitate broader participation and understanding of the goals. Specific collegiate activities that I am working to integrate under the broad headings above include the following formal programs, all of which are designed to provide multiple tactical paths towards all four of Western’s Strategic Goals, the Core Themes, and mission fulfillment:

Inclusion and Outreach Specialist. This is a professional staff position reporting to the dean, with operational focus on coordination of efforts that promote equity, inclusion, and community. Specific efforts include coordinating events, workshops, the faculty Ambassador group, and student clubs, as well
as serving as a liaison between the college and other parts of the institution, such as the SJEC, the Faculty and Staff of Color Council and the counterpart positions in other colleges. I began work to establish this position within the college while I was a department chair in 2012, working with the then-dean on the scope and description, as well as the resourcing. Over time, we have worked to modify the position to play a more central role in integration of ADEI precepts into hiring practice, and to provide structured feedback for work on evaluation processes. The position also provides expertise and content for external communications.

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee.** This body was established following the work of a pilot group, at the time focused on collecting and evaluating data on college operations pertaining to equity in particular. The purpose was to identify signals in salary and tenure and promotion data pertaining to inequities with respect to protected categories. The initial committee charge included examination of data, but also encompassed broader tasks related to coordination of ADEI efforts within and between departments, seeking resources in support of college initiatives, and acting as a resource in and of itself in promoting ADEI in the college. The committee is comprised of faculty (tenure/tenure-track and non-tenure track), staff, and student representatives. The group is currently working to update and focus its charge in order to encompass a new central role in examination and evaluation of policy, procedure, and processes (including hiring and unit evaluation plans) that may inhibit equity or otherwise create structural barriers.

**Advancing Equity and Excellence in Science (AEES) programs.** This is a program that was initially constructed and resourced via funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and is designed to improve the experiences and outcomes for students from underrepresented groups via community building and support, utilizing (for example) a cohorting model that includes seminar course constructions to connect and enhance STEM pipeline courses, as well as specialized courses designed to support key content areas while addressing common structural issues within core STEM curricula. In addition, the program provides for faculty professional development, utilizing research-based pedagogies demonstrated to improve classroom equity, outcomes, and retention—and thereby directly targeting achievement gaps. When the HHMI grant was awarded, the institution made a commitment to move from grant funding to internal funding, and one of my key roles in the project is to match resources to the project(s) on a permanent basis. To do this effectively requires advancing the models as currently derived, coupled with continued assessment and evaluation. The most current college-level strategic initiative work has resulted in a broad plan to provide support for students college-wide via a coordinated first-year-experiences structure, supported by: i) a cohort of faculty and staff whose focus is on integrated introductory course- and lab-design to include the seminar model; ii) an integrated peer-mentoring model; iii) more robust professional development around effective inclusive pedagogy; and iv) the introduction of an Associate Dean tasked with coordination of the program and assessing the efficacy of the program in serving underrepresented students and students from marginalized identities. To be clear, I am not taking credit for the first-year proposal, this was the work of many people within the college.

**Faculty Community Ambassador and Student Ambassador programs.** Both ambassador programs are designed to provide communication, networking, and support structures to enhance the overall culture and climate in the college. The Community Ambassadors (CA’s) are comprised of faculty from each department, who work together with the Inclusion and Outreach Specialist to provide direction and access to resources addressing a variety of needs and issues, as well as to provide a general conduit for networked communication. In this way, structural issues might be more readily identified and mitigated.
The Student Ambassador program was originated by a CSE alum, who worked with me and the Associate Dean to construct a network of students, at least one from each department, who play a similar role to that of the CA’s (i.e., community-building, communication conduit, and integrated support for students in the college).

These four groups/operations form the core organizational operands united under the three functional headings listed above, again with the intent to create a well-integrated set of structures to facilitate the breadth of ADEI work in the college. The purpose of the integration is to solidify the broad goals and targeted outcomes and to provide natural pathways for a broad base of faculty, staff, and students to participate in the work, and thus to clearly elucidate both the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of the ADEI efforts.

In addition to the college-specific programs mentioned here, I have been involved with ADEI efforts and attention to issues associated with the broader institution as well. As a result, I would offer the following general comments and observations. First, in a fashion parallel to that of CSE, I have noted that the evolution of ADEI efforts and responses to them have been largely driven by individuals and small groups, and the bulk of the work has thus far been accomplished by a relative few. Further, the work done institution wide is by-and-large very local in practice, in the sense that there is not an easily identifiable larger scale of coordination or communication. As such, I am looking forward to the establishment of the Office of Equity and the hiring of a Chief Diversity Officer, as I believe this will provide a core structural framework to help with coordination and integration of ADEI focus institution wide. Of course, the success of that individual and of that office will depend critically on the engagement and support of the campus, and the conviction that we all have roles to play; it will create difficulties if the prevailing state is that the CDO is the person who can solve the myriad issues and who has sole responsibility to do so.

Second, I offer the perspective that the establishment of the current Strategic Plan has been a significant help to ADEI efforts. For someone who participated in establishing programmatic and systematic work prior to the new plan, the existence of, for example, strategic Goal #4 has been helpful to provide a system-wide focal point, clearly stated and fleshed with the nine specific goals and practices, as a guidepost for tactical work in the space. It is pragmatically helpful to have an institutional commitment via a tangible goal(s), something concrete we have committed to achieving as a community. I understand that certainly not everyone would agree that we have community-wide commitment, and that progress has been incremental in many areas, but progress would be considerably more micro-level and unsupported without the existence of visible institutional aspirations. Although critical needs certainly persist, we do have scaffolding onto which we can focus efforts and utilize in seeking resources and further support. A small, related digression: There are many subtleties associated with strategic plan implementation—with core goals around ADEI—and recognizing these will be an important component to gauging success. As an example, I point to the (very) important goal of diversifying of faculty and staff. Success in hiring more diverse faculty, for instance, then requires careful examination of mentorship practice, evaluation, policy, and procedure. If we are successful in our hiring goals, then by-and-large, the people doing the mentoring and evaluation of junior faculty may well be people with significant differences from those junior faculty, and the goal is not to smooth out those differences.

Lastly, it is important to note that institutions of higher education do not exist in a vacuum, and public institutions in particular are beholden to a broad set of external constituents. Recently, of all the winds blowing at the walls of universities, ADEI work in general has attracted gales, and in some cases, hurricanes. The obvious primary challenge is that, like many other socially rooted issues, the ADEI space
has become deeply politicized and divided, with a rather loud and distracting focus being placed on specific words rather than the ideas and goals they represent. I could write several pages around this topic, but I will spare this effort! It is sufficient to observe that we have an opportunity as an institution to provide the example of best practice, and to exemplify the essential ‘right’ in providing equitable pathways for all students (and the institutional culture and environment required to accomplish this), and to function as a place where ideas can be created and assessed, and as a place where content knowledge and expertise can be brought to bear.