



State of Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Forum: Proceedings

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HELDRICH CENTER
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Summary

The Heldrich Center for Workforce Development hosted the State of Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Forum in person and streamed online on Wednesday, October 25, 2023 at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. More than 100 stakeholders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors were in attendance.¹ This research and panel discussion was a capstone to the research project, **A Workplace Divided**, which was sponsored by WorkRise at the Urban Institute. The Heldrich Center conducted a national survey of U.S. workers on their perceptions and experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination in the workplace, and on their opinions of how employers and government might reduce

discrimination and improve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace. The objective of the project, led by Rutgers professors **Dr. Carl Van Horn** and **Dr. Ronald Quincy**, was to gather rigorous, concrete evidence to inform specific strategies that employers, advocacy groups, and policymakers can use to reduce discrimination in the workplace and improve opportunities for workers of color. The survey questionnaire was fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago and informed by interviews with experts, a pilot survey, and interviews with workers. The project included a collaboration with **Dr. Anton House** of Delaware State University.

Event Highlights

The event featured the following:

- ▶ **A data presentation** from the project's researchers. Dr. Carl Van Horn, Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at the Bloustein School and Director of the Heldrich Center, and **Jessica Starace**, Survey Research Manager at the Heldrich Center, presented the top-level findings from the project, including issues for research and further action, such as reimagining the role of DEI staff and incentivizing leaders to specifically demonstrate to employees, customers, and peers how they value DEI in their organizations.
- ▶ **A keynote address** from Dr. Ronald Quincy, Professor of Professional Practice at the Bloustein School and Senior Fellow for Diversity Studies at the Heldrich Center, who discussed the inflection moment that the university, state, and nation are in, and the value of being proactive and intentional in this moment – for public, nonprofit, advocacy, and private organizations. Dr. Quincy spoke about the value of advocacy within and outside of workplaces, and the value

of leadership and workers coming to the fuller realization of what a diverse workforce can achieve when it is focused on its mission and not on trying to prevent the advancement of others. Communicating that diversity matters to workers can bring people to that greater fulfillment not just as a worker, but also as a team member and community member. Dr. Quincy explained that the event's expert panel helps to put in greater context the findings of the project's data. He noted, "We're re-scaffolding the whole notion of diversity, inclusion, equity." He asked audience members to, when thinking about the panel members' contributions, "think back generationally, there were challenges then. There's never been a phase or a stream of our recent history as a nation where we have not had challenges as it relates to equity and inclusion. There's always been challenges and we as a community of like-minded folks have been able to overcome those challenges."

¹ Representatives from the following agencies, colleges, companies, and organizations attended the event: DoSomething Inc., Felician University, Greater Raritan One-Stop Career Center, Handshake, Jobs for the Future, M&T Bank, New Jersey Business Action Center, New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, New Jersey Judiciary, New Jersey Office of the Secretary of State, New Jersey State Police, New York Life, Ocean County Career Center, Peoplism, Princeton University, Rhode Island College, Rutgers University, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, United Way of Northern New Jersey, and WorkingNation, among others.

► **A distinguished panel**, moderated by Dr. Quincy. Panelists included:

- **Dr. Anna Branch**, Senior Vice President for Equity, University Equity and Inclusion, and Professor of Sociology, Rutgers University;
- **Brittany S. Hale**, Founder and CEO, BND Consulting Group;
- **Dr. Anton House**, Assistant Professor of History, Delaware State University, and Visiting Non-resident Scholar at the Heldrich Center; and
- **Jayné Johnson**, Director, Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, State of New Jersey.

The panel discussion included engaging, provocative conversations about the practical implications of the role of employers and government in addressing the issues raised during the data presentation, particularly when it comes to:

- integrating equity into decision-making,
- the importance of measuring and communicating progress toward a goal,
- how leaders should strategically reflect on values when implementing change in an organization and how this relates to unconscious bias,
- what ways workers and employers can rethink the purpose and framing of workplace training, and
- how leaders might reconsider the ways in which DEI staff are contributing to an organization.

Several highlights of the panel included the following:

Jayné Johnson discussed the activities her office is undertaking, noting that the Heldrich Center’s research shows that “we are faced with data that reminds us of the work that is before us and the progress that we have made.” She noted that her work both inspires and challenges her, as the Governor’s Office is taking a collective and holistic approach to its activities, especially because “at the heart of our work is really people; it’s people first. We realize that people win when we are focused when there is a sense of belonging and when we empower people to show up as their best.” Because her office is situated in the Governor’s Policy Office, her staff can be empowered with the tools that can be used to shape policy.

When asked about Rutgers University’s **Diversity Plan Progress Summit**, held on November 15 virtually and in person at Rutgers–New Brunswick, **Dr. Anna Branch** explained, “Diversity is a goal that organizations pursue that workers don’t agree on.” The collective understanding of the goal should be clear and intentional about the language used, recognizing that strong feelings are being negotiated. The plan should show commitment, transparency, and accountability from leadership at the top, and trickle down, but also enable action from the ground up.

Brittany Hale described her role in guiding leaders in identifying and operationalizing their values. Without a strong culture, people are going to lean on their subjective experiences, meaning they’re leaning more toward the subjective bias, which is to be expected. She noted, “Trickle-down culture absolutely works. You have to have leaders who are curious, engaged, and are willing to ask questions and provide a dialogue with their employees. And that is the challenge. That is the issue. Are you going to take advantage of this as a better business decision? Will you take the organization along with you?”

Dr. Anton House discussed the way that biases have compounded over generations of Americans in the labor force and that “all of the workers still believe that this a country of meritocracy – individuals should be able to advance based on their hard work and what they do.” Despite this, the notion of the American Dream is disappearing, words that have brought people of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds together.

When discussing the role that c-suite DEI officers play in an organization, **Dr. Quincy** noted that offices (such as **Ms. Johnson’s**) are impactful because of who they report to – the highest level of authority of the organization because that provides a pathway to have influence. She also touched on her own upbringing and the professional trajectories experienced by her family members, noting that “we bring those own lived experiences into our work. It supports the understanding that a CEO is not going to change the bottom line by themselves. We recognize the reporting line and the ability to bring lived experiences and a fuller perspective.” The turning point is that organizations need to be people driven and leaders should look at the “employee life cycle,” including promotion and retention. Chief diversity officers must be able to “peel back” and operationalize their work, which can be done by a single individual with the connections to leadership and having a reporting ability, with leverage

and support. Doing so leads to action that is proactive, not reactive, as might be experienced in human resources. Similarly, **Dr. House** asked, “How do we reward, how do we advance, how do we make up for past discrimination?” suggesting that there is a need not only for DEI but also for reinvestment in the economy and in the lower socioeconomic classes of workers.

Having a clear framework for decision-making that can be relied upon is important for all organizations, including mission-driven (nonprofit) organizations. **Ms. Hale** explained how, in her work, she strategizes with leaders about how impact, vision, and strategy should align business initiatives with human outcomes. Hiring a chief diversity officer without a staff, budget, expectations, or a means by which they can measure success will lead to no measured outcome.

Dr. Branch asked the audience to consider the ways in which companies responded to the events of 2020 and the accompanying upsurge in advocacy by adding chief diversity officers who did not have clear goals. She asked: What was the plan intended to achieve? Where is the office’s position in the organization? What are the challenges? What are the opportunities for shift and change? **Dr. Branch** stated, “Senior leadership needs to be in dialogue about change.” There is kind of a consistent struggle at the leadership table “because diversity shows up in everything. It’s in everything and belongs to no one. Who owns what part?”

Because of recent research on the effectiveness of DEI training in the workplace, **Dr. Quincy** asked the panelists to describe their perspectives on how training should or should not be used to educate workers. **Dr. Branch** challenged leaders to think about what diversity training is trying to accomplish. What does it take in an organization to move past compositional diversity to inclusion? She asked, “How do we think about our hiring practices, our selection bias, who we retain, who comes, and who leaves. What does it look like to build a culture that is attractive and retains?” **Dr. Branch** also emphasized the value of calling attention to the expectations, language, and goals associated with training so that employees “make the value of DEI education more robust by being more specific and clearer about what our goals are. So, if we’re aiming for recruitment workshops that are nuanced enough so that employers and managers can be more thoughtful in their decision-making. Let’s say that. Let’s not say diversity training. If we’re aiming to reduce implicit bias or preferential treatment in our interactions so that there’s breakthroughs in our opportunities for community.” **Ms. Hale** agreed that the training must be applicable, have “homework,” and lead to a tangible impact that is designed to scale. The discussion concluded with questions from the audience about project data on Black female workers and how the orientation of DEI is the best way to improve culture in corporations and nonprofit organizations, or if there are alternatives.

Next Steps

Read more about A Workplace Divided with additional briefs and data being added through Spring 2024.

Watch the event video.

Purchase Dr. Anna Branch’s latest book, *Work in Black and White*.

Acknowledgments

These proceedings were written by Jessica Starace, MPP, Survey Research Manager at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. Kevin Dehmer and Dr. Carl Van Horn reviewed the proceedings. Robb C. Sewell was the editor and graphic designer.

About the Heldrich Center

The **John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development** at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, "Solutions at Work," the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center's work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers' skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers.