

Transforming Rocky Vista University into an Inclusive Excellence
Healthcare Education Institution:
A Vision Statement and Strategic Plan

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Introduction

Excellence in research, teaching, and service contributes to the making of a great university. Institutions that excel in those areas, but additionally value, embrace, and practice diversity, equity, and inclusivity are known as Inclusive Excellence (IEx) universities. Founded upon the pillars of diversity and inclusivity, Inclusive Excellence, developed and promoted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Milem, Chang, Antonio, 2005)¹ conceptualizes diversity in a broad and inclusive way; 2) approaches DEI and academic quality as one ideal (i.e., valuing and practicing DEI is excellence); 3) holds everyone on campus responsible for advancing diversity and inclusiveness (Fazelpoor, 2022)²; and 4) frames diversity in a much more complex way rather than only a number corresponding to the recruitment of certain identity groups. IEx is a systems-focused, change management strategy that transforms a higher education entity by embedding DEI throughout the institution's subsystems. These include admissions and enrollment, demographics, curriculum, pedagogy, policies, faculty development, finance, university leadership, student learning, teaching, marketing, educational materials, technology, student advising (Tiako, South, & Ray, 2021)³ hiring, university communications, recruitment, rank-and promotion, assessment, alumni relations, and evaluation. The IEx model utilizes a broad and inclusive definition of diversity encompassing culture, race, age, ethnicity or national origin, color, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, spiritual practices, political beliefs, age, national origin, mental and physical disabilities, socioeconomic status, individual life experiences and many other important dimensions that are integral to a campus community.

An IEx university understands and embraces the benefits of diversity and attempts to utilize the backgrounds, cultures, and worldviews of students, staff, and faculty to achieve the mission of the institution. Stated differently, IEx institutions consider diversity as an asset that presents and advantage in achieving the educational outcomes related to the preparation of students for serving and interacting with diverse populations (Mann, J. 2021)⁴. To that end, IEx institutions achieve or acquire educational opportunities for preparing students for succeeding in diverse work and social settings.

With its focus on preparing the next generation of DEI-competent healthcare professionals and its myriad academic, diversity, and people strengths, RVU is an emerging Inclusive Excellence healthcare university. Diversity and excellence will drive the transformation of the institution into a regionally and nationally recognized university for osteopathic medicine that values and practices IE.

Background

Rocky Vista University (RVU) is a tri-campus institution. Its original campus is located in Parker, Colorado with branches in Ivins, Utah and Billings, Montana. RVU has a special mission of providing quality healthcare education while inspiring students to serve and practice the values of integrity, collegiality, compassion, diversity, equity, inclusivity, excellence, service, and innovation. Driven by the vision of “Achieving new heights in medical education”, RVU empowers staff and faculty to contribute to an exemplary community of learning.

Poised to be fully transformed into an IEx healthcare university, the RVU community has commenced the requisite institutional work necessary for practicing Inclusive Excellence. Diversity is one of RVU’s core values, along with integrity, collegiality, compassion, excellence, service, and innovation. RVU leadership has supported the institution on its DEI journey. The Inclusive Excellence Advisory Council (formerly known as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Council), Climate Taskforce; Curriculum Taskforce, Community Taskforce, Communication Taskforce, Campus Climate Surveys, Southern Utah-DEI Committee and Colorado DEI Committee are but a few of the university’s initiatives, resources, and contributors to DEI at RVU. Pivotal to the DEI work has been the creation of the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the hiring of a Vice President for DEI to lead change efforts at RVU. In sum, over the last several years, staff, students, and faculty have labored in multiple areas to advance and maintain DEI at the university.

On another front, there are compelling forces for change at the doorstep of RVU. Recently, the agency that provides accreditation to RVU’s College of Osteopathic Medicine, The American Osteopathic Association's Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation (COCA), has proposed significant changes in its accreditation standards that will center DEI as one prominent factor in the process. Additionally, the Higher Learning Commission which governs RVU’s

accreditation is also focusing on DEI as part of its accreditation regimen. A series of campus climate surveys administered by the university revealed that students are requesting increased attentiveness to DEI in the curriculum. Despite the continued shift in the ethnic and racial demographics of U.S society, marginalized populations remain underrepresented in the field of healthcare and in medical education contributing to ethnic and racial health disparities and disproportionate health outcomes. These consequences highlight the need for RVU to graduate culturally aware and proficient healthcare professionals.

Considering the fact that diversity enhances RVU's competitiveness, assists in the preparation of culturally-competent healthcare professionals, contributes positively to diverse workplace environments, and enriches the experiences of all institutional stake holders, suggests that investing in a campus-wide systemic DEI framework is a strategic valuable endeavor. With discriminatory practices such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism being embedded in institutional structures and cultures, DEI approaches that deploy systemic, asset-based, and comprehensive strategies are essential (Valentine, C. 2020)⁵. These latter conceptual dimensions represent some of the major principles of Inclusive Excellence and thus, it follows that the future of RVU's DEI efforts is in a vision and strategic framework based on an IEx paradigm.

The purpose of this document is to propose 1) a vision and strategic plan for the structural cultural transformation of Rocky Vista University into an Inclusive Excellence healthcare education university, 2) a plan creating a diversity infrastructure to facilitate that transformation, and 3) an accountability/incentive system that will drive the IEx agenda. This proposal along with the concomitant action framework outlines the requirements to accomplish the desired change. The following section outlines this new vision.

Vision and Strategic Plan: Transforming Rocky Vista University into an Inclusive Excellence Healthcare Institution

Transforming Rocky Vista University (RVU) into regionally and nationally-recognized Inclusive Excellence (IEx) healthcare institution necessitates an accountable leadership team, strategic

initiatives, as well as engagement, collaboration, coordination, capacity-building, and commitment from the University community.

To aid in pursuing the IEx vision at RVU, the following definitions will be employed:

Inclusive Excellence: A strategy for transforming RVU into an institution that conceptualizes inclusiveness and excellence as one in the same, embeds DEI in all aspects and dimensions of the university, assigns responsibility for inclusiveness to everyone on campus, and utilizes a broad definition of diversity.

Diversity: The recognition, reflection, and representation of individual differences within a community including, but not limited to culture, race, age, ethnicity or national origin, color, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, spiritual practices, political beliefs, mental and physical ability, socioeconomic status, individual life experiences, or other ideologies.

Equity: The implementation of unbiased policies and practices to ensure everyone has access to opportunities along with needs-based distribution of resources to obtain positive outcomes so that all individuals and groups may attain their full potential and no one is deprived regardless of identity, abilities, background, or socially determined circumstances.

Inclusivity: The dynamic process of creating a welcoming environment that increases awareness, knowledge, and empathetic understanding to enable individuals with diverse backgrounds, abilities, insights, and experiences to interact in an open, fair, respectful, equitable, and collaborative fashion.

The goal and strategies to achieve the transformation of RVU into an IEx healthcare education institution are outlined below.

Goal: Establish RVU as a preeminent healthcare institution in the practice of IEx

Objective: The practice of addressing DEI issues systemically using an IE approach, is uncommon in most healthcare institutions. With the strong resolve to promote and advance the practice of DEI at RVU, there is a need to advance efforts using a systemic approach. IEx will assist in further developing initiatives to elevate RVU to the next level of DEI proficiency. To value and practice IEx will lead RVU toward becoming a nationally recognized leader in diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

Metric:

- Collaborate with five external agencies and/or programs on the topic of Inclusive Excellence by 2027

Goal: Implement and practice a systemic, structural, cultural, comprehensive, and holistic approach to DEI

Objective: The university's longstanding aim of addressing and supporting diversity, equity, and inclusivity, including increasing the diversity of its students, staff, and faculty will be more effective if approached in a systemic and concerted fashion. To this end, developing an Inclusive Excellence infrastructure involving IEx review efforts by university departments is necessary. The purpose of the structure is to incorporate DEI deeply and broadly into the structural, academic, and organizational aspects of the university. Embedding DEI into all dimensions of the university will serve as a reminder to all personnel to maintain and practice diversity at the forefront of all university actions. Examples of areas to consider include: curriculum, policies, procedures, processes, practices, admissions/enrollment, pedagogy, financial resources, leadership, training, retention, student learning, marketing, technology, research, student advising, orientation, communications, recruitment, hiring, promotion/rank, assessment, institutional advancement, and employee/administrator evaluations. In the end, the process is intended to align all subsystems of the university leading to transformational change and the achievement of RVU's mission and vision.

Metric:

- ≥80% of RVU departments and programs will undergo an IEx review using the IEx guidebook, and develop plans for DEI improvement and innovation by July 2024

Goal: Create a system of accountability and incentives for completing the Inclusive Excellence work

Objective: A diversity, equity, and inclusivity strategy without accountability or incentives increases the chances that it will end in failure. If the IE framework is to flourish, several mechanisms of accountability must be in place. First, crucial to the success of the IEx infrastructure will be unwavering support from the President, Provost, and Senior University Leadership Council. By having senior leadership acknowledge and implement IEx as the official diversity strategy for incorporating DEI at RVU, it will encourage the university community to work towards achieving the DEI vision. Having accountability will ensure the IEx infrastructure will advance RVU's DEI goals.

Metric:

- ≥80% of RVU departments and programs will report ongoing progress on DEI progress to the Inclusive Excellence Advisory Council

Goal: Utilize data and community recommendations to continuously improve the Inclusive Excellence mission.

Objective: Utilize data results and recommendations from the Campus Climate Survey, DEI Taskforce, and DEI Dashboard to support the Inclusive Excellence transformation agenda. The

existing DEI data and recommendations are another positive dimension of the DEI work that has already been underway and can serve to support departmental changes that will emerge from the RVU Inclusive Excellence agenda. This objective will primarily be driven by the Vice-President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Inclusive Excellence Advisory Council.

Metric:

- Review annual Campus Climate Survey results, and generate new initiatives designed to improve the RVU climate for diversity annually

The Practice of Inclusive Excellence:

To elicit a structural cultural shift at RVU, an IEx infrastructure will have to be developed to advance a systemic and comprehensive approach to diversity, equity, and inclusivity. A significant element to the systemic promotion of DEI will be the alignment of all institutional systems working in unison to achieve IEx. Once all systems (e.g., Human Resources, Office of Financial Aid, Admissions and Enrollment, Institutional Curriculum Committee) staff, faculty, and students are contributing to DEI, a transformation in RVU's culture will be achieved.

For example, by incorporating aspects of DEI into annual employee evaluations (a system), all personnel will be encouraged to think about and make contributions to IEx. The same can be stated about the healthcare curriculum. Integrating DEI into the course curriculum and educational materials assists in preparing culturally competent healthcare professionals. This will create an organizational culture in which everyone habitually implements changes benefitting all RVU constituents.

Embedding DEI throughout the university will be best advanced using a robust IEx infrastructure consisting of committees or specified department personnel/individuals appointed by departments to initiate the work of assessing Inclusive Excellence. Using an IEx guidebook, each responsible party will examine the status of DEI in their respective areas. The objective is to identify loci where diversity and inclusivity exist in the structure of the unit, 2) identify components that need attentiveness to diversity, and 3) develop a plan to address those areas that may be deficient in DEI. The expectation is that a strategy/plan outlining how diversity, equity, and inclusivity will be integrated into all components of a department will be developed and implemented.

The proposed plans will then be submitted to and reviewed by the RVU Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with assistance and support from the Inclusive Excellence Advisory Council. Feedback on the proposed strategies will then be provided to the departments for strengthening and improving their strategies.

Once this process is completed, the plans will be reviewed by the Senior University Leadership Council and uploaded to the RVU website for transparency and informing the community. The decisive step is for departments to begin the work of implementation of IEx with periodic updates to RVU's Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Leadership Council.

References

¹ Milem, J.F., Chang, M., Antonio, A.L. (2005). Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective. Making Excellence Inclusive Initiative. American Association of Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC.

² Fazelipoor, M. (2022). DEI in the workplace 'is everyone's responsibility'. NJBIZ. <https://njbiz.com/dei-in-the-workplace-is-everyones-responsibility/>

³ Tiako, M.J.N., South, E.C., Ray, V. (2021) Medical Schools as racialized organizations: A primer. *American College of Physicians*. 174 (8), 1143-1144.

⁴ Mann, J. (2021, April 8). *Why is diversity important?* Diversity for Social Impact. <https://diversity.social/why-is-diversity-important/>

⁵ Valentine, C. (2020). A (very brief) history of systemic racism: A glimpse into oppression, inequity, and inequality of Black people in the United States. Bloomington, IN: Author House.

⁶ Williams, D.A. (2013). Strategic diversity leadership: Activating change and transformation in higher education. Stylus.