Beyond Racial Equity’s Strategic Review

SUMMARY REPORT

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Beyond Racial Equity’s Strategic Review
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Emerson College
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THIS SUMMARY REPORT IS A SHORTER VERSION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PROJECT REPORT. BOTH REPORTS WERE CREATED BY BEYOND RACIAL EQUITY.

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2 BEYOND RACIAL EQUITY STRATEGIC REVIEW SUMMARY REPORT
Project Goals

Identify and address deeply-rooted structural and systemic barriers that interfere with the full participation and belonging of BIPOC students, students with disabilities, and students from other marginalized groups within the Emerson community. Emerson had a specific student focus, however because the student experience is created by all of the stakeholders at Emerson, faculty, staff, and leadership were included in this project.

Project Team

The Beyond Racial Equity (BRE) project team was composed of experts with backgrounds in academia, accessibility, diversity, equity, inclusion, organizational development, and anti-oppression.

Project Process

BRE’s Strategic Review process included talking with stakeholders across the College, including four committees, six classes, and members of the Emerson Community in one-on-one or focus group meetings. Alumni of Emerson, the Emerson student body, faculty, staff, and administrators were invited to participate in an online survey platform to also provide their perspectives. This process took place over the course of academic year 2021-22, concluding with a comprehensive report summarizing learnings and recommendations.

The acronym DEIASJ is used in this report to represent diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility and social justice work to ensure that each element is recognized. Emerson does not have a commonly used acronym to describe the work. The terms and acronyms applied at Emerson are important decisions for the College to make as a next step.
Discovery Summary and Recommendations

The recommendations contained in this report are generally long term oriented because institutional change takes time and because institutions and the people within them exist within a larger social framework. This larger social framework significantly influences institutions and also needs to change. Our recommendations focus on what we believe is within Emerson’s control, while being mindful of the systemic societal forces that Emerson sits within moving much more slowly.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Understanding the student experience was the primary focus of this project’s discovery process. The student experience does not exist in isolation, but rather, is highly influenced by the focus areas covered in this report.

What We Learned

Emerson students appreciate the hands-on and application focus of the College’s programs.

Students credited the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their professors as contributors to their application based learning experiences.

The student experience is highly dependent on the faculty, major/discipline, and one-on-one interactions. (e.g. between students, students and faculty, students and leadership). That variability has created experiences of belonging in some cases and experiences of exclusion in other cases.

Students reported the need to advocate for themselves and push the College to do DEIASJ work, rather than the College leading the work.

Students felt actions taken by Emerson often felt superficial and performative.

What We Recommend

- Expand student opportunities for community building to connect outside of majors and departments by offering more activities open across groups.

- Because the Student of Color Pre-Orientations was highlighted, consider other diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and social justice programming that may be helpful for students. Program examples include Allyship, Microaggression, Implicit Bias, Intersectionality, Cultural Competencies, and Cultural Basics for International Students.
FOCUS AREAS

Key influencers of the student experience have been identified and divided into several core areas - Compass, Culture, Leadership, Structure and Programs, Faculty/Staff, and Communication/Marketing. This section shares the summary and recommendations for each area from a long-term and systemic perspective. For purposes of this report, Faculty and Staff were combined into one section.

Compass

We call this area the “Compass” because a compass provides essential guidance or “wayfinding” that organizations need. Emerson is missing foundational elements that are essential for wayfinding with DEIASJ work.

What We Learned

Emerson’s espoused values are not consistently applied or felt day-to-day at the College and are not congruent with many of the values mentioned as important to Emerson related to community, unity, inclusion, and collaboration.

Emerson has separate documentation that may be interpreted as a “Code of Conduct” for students, staff, and faculty, however, the expectations are different for each group.

The Emerson Strategic Plan is outdated and does not play a meaningful role as a wayfinder and decision-making tool at Emerson.

Emerson does not have a DEIASJ strategy, leading to disparate and disconnected DEIASJ work and a lack of clarity, focus, accountability, and measurable progress.

What We Recommend

- Update Emerson’s Values and behaviors in inclusive, co-creative sessions with key stakeholders.
- Create an Emerson Code of Conduct with measures of accountability for the same expectations, regardless of role.
- Update the Emerson Strategic Plan to include DEIASJ. This clarity will be exponentially beneficial to Emerson in a myriad of ways.
What We Learned

Emerson has been invested in DEIASJ work for a number of years and there are many teams or committees doing the work. The commitment to DEIASJ work is a cultural cornerstone of the College.

Emerson focuses on creative and practical learning and has a culture of appreciation for the uniqueness of individuals. Outside of these two pervasive cultural elements, what distinguishes Emerson's culture is how unintentionally varied the working and learning experience is at the College.

Lack of trust, collaboration, and accountability was consistently mentioned as a part of the culture by most stakeholders. The lack of trust, collaboration and accountability significantly impedes progress in DEIASJ.

Emerson stakeholders often discussed their experiences with an “us vs. them” mindset and a “call-out” culture, where different factions seem to be competing with each other.

Based on Emerson’s long history in DEIASJ, there is a collective pain, trauma, and fear surrounding the work that blocks desired progress. There is a strong collective cognitive dissonance about who Emerson says it is versus the experience of those working and learning there.

A significant part of the Emerson experience is feeling under-resourced, overworked, and overwhelmed. There is an unsustainable sense of urgency to the DEIASJ work, rather than a long term orientation that views the work as a movement.

Emerson’s DEIASJ work does not attribute the same level of importance or support to all diversity groups. In particular, students expressed pain and trauma related to neglect of their holistic needs and lack of recognition of their holistic identities.

What We Recommend

- A multiple-level cultural assessment process to address Emerson’s cultural opportunities, once the Values and Code of Conduct is completed.
- Embed the mantra “working at the speed of trust” into the culture, incorporating the importance of slowing down and focusing on relationality. Without trust there is no foundation to build upon, especially in DEIASJ work.

Culture

Emerson has an opportunity to intentionally cultivate the desired culture that supports the strategy and experience desired for every stakeholder of the College.
Leadership

Leadership is an essential ingredient for transforming any organizational system.

What We Learned

Many key stakeholders at Emerson deeply desire building sustainable, systemic DEIASJ work. However, Emerson leadership, defined as those designated to leadership positions in administration, Academic Affairs, or departments, is perceived as reactive to DEIASJ issues by many stakeholders.

Emerson leadership tries to be responsive to student needs, while inconsistently partnering with students to determine the root causes of issues and solutions.

Administration and faculty are struggling with the best ways to communicate and positively work with students.

Over the last year plus, Emerson has seen turnover in a number of key leadership positions.

The President’s Council hasn’t done collective DEIASJ work as a leadership team.

There is a significant emphasis on roles and hierarchy at Emerson, rather than focusing on a relational orientation and solving problems together.

What We Recommend

- Hold a series of externally-facilitated introductory leadership development training to collectively learn about systems of oppression, whiteness, power, control, build shared language and learn how to be in conversation around these topics.

- Explore restorative practices in education to understand the powerful way that these practices will help everyone connect with each other in deeper and more relational ways.

- Build relationships with other colleges and universities that are as dedicated to DEIASJ as Emerson to learn leading practices and co-create.

- Embrace a stakeholder orientation model to decision making. A decision-making practice that builds trust and transparency is critical in DEIASJ work.

The leadership teams must build stamina being uncomfortable with each other and discussing difficult topics. This leadership work creates the conditions possible for sustainable, systemic change.
Structure and Programs

How Emerson organizes teams and people to lead and deliver DEIASJ work significantly impacts the ability of Emerson to be successful.

What We Learned

Emerson’s current DEIASJ efforts are implemented through a decentralized structure including the Social Justice Center (SJC), dedicated resource partners (e.g., Internationalization and Equity, Intercultural Student Affairs, Student Accessibility Services, department equity committees, and Making Emerson IDEAS) across the College, and the Presidential Advisory Group for Community Equity (PAG) established in the Spring of 2021.

The shift from the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to the SJC added the important emphasis of healing, advocacy, and community engagement to Emerson’s DEIASJ efforts.

This shift also de-emphasized overarching DEISAJ strategic leadership, knowledge, and resource support, leaving gaps and inconsistent implementation of DEIASJ ideas and practices.

From an accessibility structure standpoint, there are multiple entities responsible for implementing accommodations for faculty, staff, and students, each with its own process.

Although the Bias Reporting process was recently improved, students still reported being unclear about the process and questioned whether it truly served their needs.

Emerson implemented structural changes over the course of this project that strengthened its ability to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment. These changes included the movement of the newly named Office of Equal Opportunity to Campus Life as a standalone office reporting to the Vice President and Dean of Campus Life as well as the increase of resources to support Academic Affairs under the Internationalization and Equity Office.

There are several cultural and identity-specific programs or initiatives that contribute to a positive student experience and further support Emerson’s DEIASJ goals, such as Teach-in On Race, Creative Cafe (2021-2022), Intercultural Student Organization programs, programs for first-year students, and the Dean’s Fellowship for Racial Equity & Leadership Development Program.

Some individual leaders and departments have deepened their knowledge of contextual barriers to DEIASJ. However, leadership at Emerson has not collectively participated in a program on anti-oppression, decolonization, racial equity, disability inclusion, or other contextually relevant learning programs to strengthen their collective knowledge and enhance alignment across the College.
There are programs and activities led within the different departments across Emerson, this project did not include a detailed review of program benefits, impact, and effectiveness.

**What We Recommend**

- Leverage Emerson’s current structure to reimagine Emerson’s DEIASJ infrastructure to improve communication, collaboration, and alignment with Emerson’s overarching DEIASJ strategy - to include all levels of leadership, departments, students, and community stakeholders.

- Continue to refine the Bias Reporting process with key stakeholders, including students, to identify concerns and co-create a process that serves the intended purpose.

- Implement on-going leadership programs focused on collective learning and dialogue to drive transformational and sustainable changes. Content including anti-oppression, anti-racism, historical context for racism today, racial identity, and intersectionality are highlighted to address racial equity.

- Review DEIASJ activities at the programmatic level across all departments for a more detailed understanding and alignment.
Communications and Marketing

Communication and marketing are tools to support the enactment of DEIASJ through each of the other themes outlined.

What We Learned

Emerson provides multiple avenues for stakeholders to receive DEIASJ information. However, there was recognition that internal communications often did not improve understanding or resolve concerns.

Emerson’s marketing, through the website for example, highlights the importance of dismantling systemic barriers, embracing anti-oppressive practices and pedagogy, and leveraging an interactional approach. There is still a significant gaps campus-wide in the application. This may lead to the perception that Emerson is not living up to who it espouses itself to be from a DEIASJ perspective.

Communication from leadership often feels performative to students. Behavior and actions as it relates to DEIASJ felt inconsistent with espoused values.

Emerson’s reputation of being an institution with a hands-on and practical approach to education was a shared value for the institution. Emerson also embraces uniqueness and quirkiness, and welcomes those who may identify as non-mainstream.

Emerson’s marketing appears to attract students who want to change the future from a DEIASJ perspective. Yet, students are met with learning steeped in long-held beliefs of the dominant culture. This disconnect appears to be contributing to student dissatisfaction in this area.

It is important to acknowledge Emerson’s focus on and channels for equity-related communication channels. This emphasis is important and should continue with a concentration on opportunities for dialogue and collective problem solving.

What We Recommend

• Once developed, leverage Emerson’s updated Values and Strategic Plan to further define Emerson’s student value proposition, a summary of benefits delivered through its programs.

• Assess all marketing collateral to ensure there is a comfortable balance between aspirational goals and acknowledgment of Emerson’s current state.

• Leverage updated student value proposition and assessment results to better balance student expectations with Emerson’s journey as a community.

• Increase the opportunities for one-on-one and/or small group dialogue to help convey and discuss important topics.
Faculty and Staff

Emerson is made up of faculty and staff that care about students and their experiences. There was an expressed commitment to DEIASJ.

What We Learned:

Emerson has made strides with hiring and promoting people who identify as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ within faculty and staff while also acknowledging there is much more to do in this area.

While there has been progress, there were concerns expressed about diverse staff and faculty leaving Emerson, and the impact that will have on the community moving forward.

Among faculty and staff, there is clear engagement and a desire to improve the experience of DEIASJ for all Emersonians, particularly for students. This was demonstrated through the following:

- Equity committees within each department,
- Formalizing the Making Emerson IDEAS group,
- Formation of the Dean’s Fellowship for Racial Equity & Leadership Development program,
- Faculty support in pedagogy/curriculum changes, and
- The addition of “excellent teaching” criteria to the Faculty Handbook to build a more inclusive environment and recognize the often invisible service that faculty (e.g. BIPOC faculty) engage in to meet standards for advancement.

There were questions raised about the impact of these efforts to date and recognition that there is more to do, particularly about harm that happens in the classroom.

Faculty and staff felt blamed by administrators and students for DEIASJ issues at Emerson and felt it was important that all parts of the College acknowledge shared accountability in making improvements.

What We Recommend

- Explore faculty and staff’s perspectives regarding DEIASJ as it relates to their roles, work, and sense of belonging at Emerson.
- Leverage Emerson’s “Compass” work to build and align localized DEIASJ plans within all areas of Academic Affairs.
- Create communities of practice to support on-going and expanded learning and the application of best practices in DEIASJ pedagogy.
- Gather baseline data to measure the impact of committees, the Internationalization and Equity, and other programs to further refine programming and support to faculty.
**Accessibility**

Accessibility is called out as a separate category to highlight additional details discovered during the BRE Equity Review.

**What We Learned**

There are multiple entities responsible for implementing access and accommodations at Emerson and each has its own process for students, staff, and faculty.

Emerson is committed to creating a more accessible and inclusive environment for all students, including students with disabilities. For students, more actions are needed to support these words, including creating work environments that demonstrate the valuing of physical and emotional wellbeing.

Accessibility was raised as a significant concern; either a lack of, inconsistencies in how accommodations are provided, or highly uncoordinated or siloed efforts. The most prevalent examples were remote class options and accessible PDF documents.

Accessibility feels like an afterthought without an inclusive, unified, informed approach.

This often leaves students to fend for themselves in the classroom and socially.

**What We Recommend**

- Establish an accessibility approach that consolidates planning, process, and support to improve alignment and outcomes.
- Review all diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and initiatives to ensure disability has equal prioritization with all other diversity elements.
- Conduct an accommodations process audit to identify any differences, gaps, or challenges in the process.
- Conduct an assessment of physical and digital accessibility at Emerson and develop a multi-year approach for addressing identified issues.
- Ensure accessibility and disability inclusion questions are addressed in a climate survey for students, faculty, and staff.
- Conduct disability inclusion and anti-ableism training across the College.
- Evaluate Emerson’s ability to provide more remote learning options for students with disabilities and create a consistent approach to online and in-person experiences.
- Demedicalize absences and diminish the hoops students have to go through for approved absences.
Religion and Spirituality is separated as a category to facilitate focused attention because these areas are often overlooked in DEIASJ work.

What We Learned
The Center for Spiritual Life is Emerson’s inclusive, multifaith hub for religious and spiritual programming, support, and education. This indicates support for religious and spiritual beliefs at Emerson.

There appears to be no clear alignment about religion and spirituality to ensure multiple perspectives from non-religious to religious, non-spiritual to spiritual, all feel a sense of belonging at the College.

What We Recommend

- Explore religious, spirituality, and non-belief perspectives in the upcoming climate survey.
- Determine what guidance should be made available to administrators, faculty, staff, and students to ensure inclusivity is conveyed regardless of religious and spiritual beliefs.
- Determine an overall approach to manage religious-based crises to include the development of decision-making criteria to determine when vigils will be held, when Emerson will make statements, or take further action.
Next Actions

The journey to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and social justice in any organization is complex and multifaceted. This is also true for Emerson. An immediate priority is for Emerson’s leadership, inclusive of the new VP of Equity and Social Justice to convene, prioritize actions, and begin the work of culture transformation to create a diverse, equitable environment where all Emersonians feel a sense of belonging.

Executive Summary Conclusion

In the engagement of BRE and over the course of this project, Emerson College has demonstrated a genuine desire to better understand the barriers to the full participation and belonging of BIPOC students, students with disabilities, and students from other marginalized groups within the Emerson community. All of the people and groups that BRE spoke to during this project demonstrated a genuine desire to improve the experience of being a student at Emerson. The challenge for many was not knowing how to do this. The work needed to address the Emerson experience is foundational, deep, and requires a never-ending commitment; there are no shortcuts. Through a thoughtful approach to implementing recommendations in this report, there is an unprecedented opportunity to significantly and systemically improve the student experience at Emerson College.

About Beyond Racial Equity

Beyond Racial Equity is co-founded by Quionna Allen and Tara Jenkins. Quionna identifies as a Black woman and Tara identifies as a white woman. We were deeply unsatisfied with the typical and traditional approaches to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. We decided we must do more and created Beyond Racial Equity.