

Columbia River Gorge Commission  
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)  
Assessment Report

Commissioner and Staff Perspectives,  
Awareness, and Interests

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## Background

Between November 2020 and March 2021, Tina E. Patterson, MCI Arb, conducted one-on-one interviews with Columbia River Gorge Commission Commissioners and staff to identify individual perspectives related to the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These interviews and the resulting report are a part of the Commission's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) project. An overview of the DEI project, the interview questions, observations, recommendations, and resources are provided in this report.

During the June 2020 public comment period for the Gorge 2020 Draft Management Plan, staff received comments from individuals related to the topic of equity. Staff presented a summary of these comments to Commissioners at the August 2020 Commission meeting. The Commission discussed how to respond to these public comments and agreed to include a DEI statement and policies into the Gorge 2020 Management Plan. Following the August meeting, Commissioners and staff worked together to develop a draft DEI statement that staff presented at the September 9, 2020 Commission meeting. The Commission reviewed and made amendments to the draft DEI statement and policies and passed a motion to include them in the Draft Management Plan for adoption. In October 2020, the Columbia River Gorge Commission (CRGC) adopted a new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Statement in the Gorge 2020 Management Plan.

In September 2020, Commission staff began working with Tina Patterson, an extern pursuing a master's degree at Pepperdine University, to develop a framework for the Commission's DEI plan. At the October 13, 2020 meeting, staff and Ms. Patterson presented to Commissioners the proposed DEI project. Commissioners were presented the following definitions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as a foundation for the project:

**Diversity** is understanding, embracing, and celebrating each other's individual differences, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, religious and spiritual beliefs, age, and socio-economic background, as well as the intersections of these identities. Diversity enhances a community through mutual respect, as we honor each other's lived reality.<sup>1</sup>

**Equity** is providing everyone what they need to be successful.<sup>2</sup>

**Inclusion** is the conscious practice of actively engaging people of different backgrounds whose "voices are respected and heard, diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and approaches are valued, and everyone is encouraged to make a unique and meaningful contribution."<sup>3</sup> This practice requires the integration of individuals' experiences, knowledge, and perspectives, while acknowledging our

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<sup>1</sup> American Association of University Women (AAUW), Diversity and inclusion toolkit (2011).

<sup>2</sup> National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA), *Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Guide*, page 2.

<sup>3</sup> Pless & Maak, "Building an Inclusive Diversity Culture: Principles, Processes and Practice", *Journal of Business Ethics* 2004, p. 130-131.

history and continually reflecting on issues of power and privilege. The intentional goal of an inclusive community is the full and equal participation of all.<sup>4</sup>

The DEI project has two goals.

**Goal 1:** Develop Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policy and Procedures, choosing to follow State of Washington requirements for state agencies.

**Goal 2:** Develop a draft Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion strategy, and begin the workplan for the CRGC. The steps to achieve this goal include work sessions with a) Commissioners and b) Commission staff.

Goal 1 was completed in late October, and policies related to DEI were submitted to Washington State.

The report that follows, written by staff in consultation with Ms. Patterson, focuses on Goal 2, part a and b: reviewing and capturing the work with the Commissioners and Commission staff; specifically, one-on-one interviews to identify Commissioner and staff perspectives and interests. On the following pages are the results of the interviews with the Commissioners and staff. Comments and statements are provided in summary format or without attribution to the speaker.

In addition, the report includes four sections intended to aid the Commission as it defines and refines its DEI workplan: a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges analysis related to Commissioner and staff feedback; general observations; recommendations for next steps; and a list of resources that may be helpful in the learning process.

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<sup>4</sup> National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA), Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Guide, page 2.

## Questions for Commissioner and Staff Perspectives on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Each Commissioner and staff member was presented the eight questions below as well as two additional questions: “Is there anything we haven’t discussed that you would like to discuss?” and, “What questions do you have for me?”

- Commissioners: What does equity mean to you in your role as a Commissioner?*

*Staff: What does equity mean to you in your role as a staff member?*
- How could the Commission better serve all the communities within the National Scenic Area (NSA)?*
- Do you think that the Commission provides an environment for the free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs among Commissioners, staff and the public? Please explain.*
- What would be helpful for you to be able to engage in DEI work going forward?*
- What leadership role, if any, do you see the Commission having in DEI efforts in the NSA?*
- Commissioners: Would you be interested and have the time to participate in DEI learning opportunities to assist the Commission’s work in the Gorge?*
- Commissioners:(Optional) How much of a priority is DEI to you in the next year compared to other day-to-day priorities? If you think it is high priority, what are the three most important aspects of DEI to be included in the workplan?*
- Commissioners: (Optional) Imagine it is 5 years from now; what would Commission progress in DEI look like?*

The next sections, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges, Observations, and Recommendations, analyzes the Commissioner and staff responses further.

## Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges (SWOC)

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges analysis is a strategic planning tool used to develop awareness of all factors involved in analysis based on input from stakeholders.

The analysis is included to succinctly illustrate perceived or stated strengths, weakness, opportunities, and challenges the Commission may encounter as it moves forward with developing the DEI Plan. Strengths and weaknesses are internally influenced or impacted and can be mitigated or addressed by a combination of monitoring and evaluation of people, process, or technology. Opportunities and challenges are externally influenced or impacted and can be mitigated or addressed by monitoring and evaluation of access to resources provided by others, economic trends, community needs, or priorities.

### **Strengths**

Answers questions such as “What are we known for? What are we most proud of? What are we doing well? What/who are our key resources and exemplars? What do we control (people, resources, knowledge) that gives us an advantage? What are our key areas of expertise? What resources or capabilities allow us to meet our mandate/mission? What positive aspects of the program have students/faculty or others commented on?”

### **Weaknesses**

Answers question such as, “What are we doing poorly or struggling with? What frustrations/challenges have been expressed? What do we need to fix? What are the internal weaknesses and deficiencies in resources or capabilities that may be hindering the program’s ability to accomplish its mission/mandate?”

### **Opportunities**

Answers questions such as, “What opportunities will most dramatically enhance the quality of our program? What changes in demand do we expect to see over the next years? What key environmental/market factors may positively impact the program? Where can we create more value for the program? What external or future opportunities exist for the program? What are some key areas of untapped potential?”

### **Challenges**

Answers questions such as, “What are the key challenges or threats to the quality of our program that need to be addressed? What are others doing that we are not? What future challenges may affect the program? What external or future challenges or threats does the program face?”

The SWOC Matrix below reflects input from Commissioners and staff regarding DEI.

Strength	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of resources within Commission: Commissioners, staff, community</li> <li>• Interested Commissioners and staff</li> <li>• Empathetic and self-aware Commission staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pending agreed upon definition of DEI for CRGC</li> <li>• Perception that Commission is elitist</li> <li>• Need public/community input</li> <li>• Competing agency priorities</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with affinity groups</li> <li>• Interested Commissioners and staff</li> <li>• Incoming Commissioners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commissioner turnover</li> <li>• Budget limitations</li> <li>• Staff workload and bandwidth</li> </ul>

It is important to note that an SWOC analysis reflects a specific period of time and should be revisited periodically to measure progress and completion of tasks, and to identify any potential gaps.

Ms. Patterson suggests adding the following highlighted items to the SWOC analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of resources within Commission: Commissioners, staff, community</li> <li>• Interested Commissioners</li> <li>• Report submitted to State of Washington</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competing agency priorities versus identifying partners</li> <li>• Pending agreed upon definition of DEI for CRGC</li> <li>• Need public/community input</li> <li>• Perception that Commission is elitist</li> <li>• No clearly established relationship with affinity groups</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify existing DEI plans that may be used by CRGC</li> <li>• Exploring grants, funding</li> <li>• Work with affinity groups</li> <li>• Interested Commissioners</li> <li>• Public/Community input</li> <li>• Incoming Commissioners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commissioner turnover</li> <li>• Budget limitations</li> <li>• Staff workload and bandwidth</li> <li>• Undefined Scope</li> <li>• Governmental restrictions due to COVID-19</li> </ul>

## Observations

The following are observations based on interviews with Commissioners and staff.

### Definitions

Some Commissioners are unclear about what the definition of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is. As one Commissioner shared, *“[DEI is] not something you think about every day. Some of the questions are difficult to consider given what we do. Starting with DEI – what is it? Most of us are older white folk. It’s not our lingo.”*

Some Commission staff members are unclear about what the definition of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is. As one staff member shared, *“So as far as what DEI work is, I’m not sure what that means... I’m open to creating an open and inclusive environment in the workplace. I’m just not sure how I could proactively engage in DEI work so I’m kind of at a loss.”*

To advance the Commission DEI Plan, agreed-upon definitions are needed for diversity, equity, and inclusion. One staff member stated, *“I think I need a better idea of what DEI work means. Full disclosure, before the events of this past summer, I don’t think I had ever seen the acronym DEI before, and then I started seeing it everywhere.”* As mentioned by a Commissioner, *“It would be helpful for Commissioners to get an understanding of what diversity means and establish a single definition.”* Another Commissioner observed, *“I realized that we need to define what DEI is. People use equity and equality interchangeably. They’re not the same. We make policy decisions. We arbitrated hearings. But equity goes beyond that as we make our policies. We have to make sure we don’t have imbalances that impact the people we serve.”*

### Communication

Several Commissioners mentioned a statement similar to this one, *“We’ve had rough exchanges lately among Commissioners. People need to listen and try to understand where people are coming from.”* Other Commissioners’ exchanges were considered demeaning, dismissive, or disrespectful.

Several Commission staff mentioned tense communication among Commissioners. Other Commissioners’ exchanges were considered demeaning, dismissive, or disrespectful to fellow Commissioners. One staff member suggested admitting mistakes or when errors are made as one way to mitigate tensions. *“Part of that is admitting when we make a mistake or could have done better -- that’s progress. Perfectionism is part of the dominant culture.”*

Another staff member observed: *“I know the words I use have weight, and there are several of them I’m consciously trying to shift over time, and they may have something to do with how I make people from other backgrounds feel. I try to choose words in a better, more productive way.”*

Lack of respectful conversations can result in Commissioners not feeling valued, respected, or heard. This may manifest as Commissioners suddenly acting out in ways that would



seem uncooperative, hostile, or argumentative. It may also manifest as an increase in absenteeism to avoid the source of discomfort.

### **Timing and Pace**

While several Commissioners acknowledged the sense of urgency to develop a DEI workplan, it should be tempered with the ongoing requirements of the Act; one Commissioner observed, *"I think this is the beginning. It's going to be a slow process. Everyone isn't to remain in their comfort zone."*

While several Commission staff acknowledged the sense of urgency to develop a DEI workplan several staff were concerned about the timing of implementing an equity workplan with competing priorities., *"I think the Commission has got its priorities all wrong on this by having us do multiple things at once. We've got to do one thing, get it right, and then let that inform our work in the other policy areas."* Another staff member shared, *"The Commission is more gung-ho about climate change; equity will be easy to push to the side if the outcome of this process is to suggest that we have to adapt the way we've worked in the past -- or maybe that's too harsh."*

Furthermore, the SWOC identified "competing agency priorities" as a weakness in implementing the DEI Plan. Commission staff comments underscore this sentiment, *"It's not priority number one, but it is what has to be done."* However, some comments suggest the importance of the intersection of DEI with other Commission workplan priorities: *"In terms of other planning efforts, climate change planning needs to be aligned with equity."*

### **Participation**

Awareness and interest in DEI topics vary by Commissioner. Many Commissioners would like to be involved in DEI learning opportunities and seek a way to balance this involvement with Commission and Commission responsibilities as outlined in the Act.

It is important to also be aware that a few Commissioners have no interest in a DEI effort, feel there is no equity concern in the NSA, and think the Commission would be better off focusing its attention on other matters. Two examples are below:

*"I should state that one size doesn't fit all. In the Gorge, there's been no complaint about inequity. Our rules apply to everyone including staff."*

*"I found the opening statement in the Management Plan to be extraordinarily offensive and negative."*

Furthermore, Commissioners who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) may show signs of exhaustion and/or weariness in discussing the subject of DEI, because the topic has been discussed previously with what seems to be no apparent changes or results. One person shared, *"If it weren't for Commissioner Miller the DEI conversation would not be happening, there's also resistance."*

Many Commission staff would like to be involved in DEI learning opportunities and seek a way to balance this involvement with workload and Commission responsibilities as outlined in the Act: *"I love that we're dedicating specific resources to this, so all the work you're doing with Joanna is awesome, and I think it needs to continue."* Another staff member said, *"I see this whole diversity, equity, and inclusion work as being something that we need to be starting out individually looking at within our own lives and our own values, and then translate that into our work with the Commission, the Commissioners and their roles, and staff and our roles."*

Views on public participation varied, as demonstrated by one staff member, *"Whatever we do is going to be limited by our authority. We cannot force folks to do things that aren't related to our authority, we can encourage, we can promote, we can take part in, we can do lots of things, but when it comes to our authority, we have to be careful not to step outside of that boundary."*

It is important to articulate that implementing a DEI Plan does not mean that existing staff must leave. Several staff members expressed hope that the current staff configuration would remain intact which working to achieve greater diversity in the organization: *"A more diverse staff is a harder one if you don't add staff and people don't leave."* *"Secretly I hope nobody leaves in the next 5 years, none of our staff people, because we finally have a nice stable staff but on the other hand, I would love to see more people on staff and see if we can work on improving ourselves that way."*

## Recommendations

Based on Commissioner and staff interviews, Ms. Patterson offers the following recommendations.

### **Communication**

As noted in the questions, several participants mentioned strained communication among Commissioners. One Commissioner specifically stated, *"It would be nice to have a retreat about where we are all coming from (a multi-day retreat) to give people time to absorb and think about how to have dialogues."* Ms. Patterson recommends a retreat for the Commissioners with the topic of respectful conversations as a keynote before further engaging Commissioners in the DEI Project.

Several Commissioners mentioned a prior retreat where communication was one of the topics. Ms. Patterson suggests reading *Difficult Conversations* by Doug Stone and Sheila Heen and *Thanks for the Feedback* also by Doug Stone and Sheila Heen. As mentioned earlier, not acknowledging and addressing the strained communication could lead to Commissioners acting out in ways that would seem uncooperative, hostile, or argumentative.

One staff member suggested a land acknowledgement at the beginning of the April 2021 meeting. The staff person stated, *"It would be meaningful, and a nice way to combine with*

*the word of the day. It's an action item I wanted to capture because it's foundational, and a simple thing we could do right away."*

Other comments focused on learning opportunities among Commission staff: discuss whether the team would like to explore learning more about diversity, equity, and inclusion through mechanisms such a book discussion, lunch and learn with guest speakers, watch a brief video together and discuss, or selecting a topic to research and presenting it to other members of the group.

Ms. Patterson has provided a brief list of books to consider in the Resources section of this report. She highly recommends engaging all staff who wish to participate in suggesting books. The Gorge area historically has been home to populations that were displaced or decimated it may be helpful to understand how that history has impacted the Gorge – economically, environmentally, and culturally.

### **Timing and Pace**

DEI is currently being discussed in many organizations with a sense of urgency to develop and roll out a plan. Ms. Patterson recommends that the Commission take the time to be intentional and address the clarifying questions stated by one Commissioner, *"What is our definition of Community? What is our definition of Community of Place? What is our definition of Community of Intent? What do we mean by Serve? What are the investments that would be of greatest value with the Commission's limited resources?"* Answers to these questions will help the Commission define and refine the framework for its DEI Plan. As one staff member stated, *"I don't think the Commission is clear on this I think the Commission jumped on this concept late and without a good sense of what it ought to be doing. I think the first thing it needs to do is get its house in order."* The Plan should reflect the Commission's short-term and long-term goals, once identified and agreed upon.

Furthermore, the SWOC analysis identified "competing agency priorities versus identifying partners" as a weakness in implementing the DEI Plan. Ms. Patterson encourages the Commission to leverage the work of affinity groups and organizations that are similar in focus (e.g., land use agencies) or similar in ideology, to support the Commission's DEI work.

Ms. Patterson recommends the DEI Plan be reviewed and updated often so that it is relevant and accurately reflects the goals and aspiration of the Commission.

### **Participation**

As one Commissioner stated, *"It's beautiful to hear the Commissioners speak based on their respective experience."* Commissioners who have indicated that they would not participate in DEI workplan efforts need to be acknowledged. However, if the majority of the Commission wishes to proceed with developing and implementing a DEI strategy, those who oppose should be asked not to (overtly or subtly) deter the Commission's efforts.

Many staff articulated a desire for DEI learning opportunities for Commissioner and staff. One staff member voiced, *"Bring in some help from outside people who are well-versed in*

*these topics and are professionals to train us and keep it fresh.” Another staff person shared, “We do continuing education for other planning things; this is just as important.”*

Staff reported working with other organizations to deepen learning and establish linkages with communities. One staff member commented, *“Reach out to organizations like Next Door and say we want to work with people in the community. You work with underserved populations; who are the populations and who are their leaders that we could work with and learn from?”*

One staff member suggested Commissioners and staff participating in an in-person retreat: *“In person retreats could really help to foster a better sense of community among the Commission and between the Commission and staff. Whether it is yearly or more often, these check-ins that are less formal [are important], and we’ll have the space to get to know each other and understand each other better. There’s a sense of disconnect now between staff and the Commission and this would be one way to build a bridge.”*

Engaging stakeholders (staff, Commissioners, public) who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), and are showing signs of exhaustion and weariness in discussing the subject of DEI is a multi-step process. Ms. Patterson recommended that the BIPOC stakeholders be asked how they would like to participate – as an observer or be actively engaged? An observer is a person who observes the process but is not expected to expend the emotional and mental labor to bring the plan together. BIPOC stakeholders who choose to be active participants should not lead the DEI discussion by default.

So, who should lead the DEI dialogue? Ms. Patterson suggests a representative from the dominant culture who is not involved with the Commission and who is a professionally skilled facilitator to keep the conversation centered around the issues. In addition, she recommends that this discussion take place during a retreat, so that all participants can give their undivided attention to the topic of DEI. Ms. Patterson anticipates that there will be times when one or more of the Commissioners may feel alienated from the group. She suggests employing an eight-step feedback process outlined below and presented in Ingrid Bens’s book *Facilitating With Ease!*<sup>5</sup>

### **8-Step Feedback Process, from *Facilitating With Ease!* By Ingrid Bens**

1. Ask permission to offer feedback.
  - Asking permission lets people tell you if this is a bad time to hear feedback or indicate they are ready to pay careful attention
2. Describe specifically what you are observing.
  - Give a clear and specific description of what you observed

<sup>5</sup> Bens, Ingrid, *Facilitating With Ease! Core Skills for Facilitators, Team Leaders, and Members, Managers, Consultants and Trainers*, 4th ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018, pages 139- 141

<b>8-Step Feedback Process, from <i>Facilitating With Ease!</i> By Ingrid Bens</b>	
3. Tell people about the impact of their actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the impact on individuals, the program, or the department</li> </ul>
4. Give the person(s) an opportunity to explain.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen actively, using attentive body language and paraphrasing key points</li> </ul>
5. Draw out ideas from others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frame the whole thing as a problem to be solved. Urge people to offer their ideas</li> </ul>
6. Offer specific suggestions for improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make suggestions that will improve the situation</li> </ul>
7. Summarize and express your support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering encouragement and ending on an optimistic note sets the stage for improved performance</li> </ul>
8. Follow up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End the feedback discussion with clear action steps</li> </ul>

## Summary

Ms. Patterson encourages Commission staff and Commissioners to view this report as one of many resources at their disposal to formulate a (or the Commission's) DEI Plan. As stated by a few Commissioners, competency in DEI is ongoing work; it is a process of lifelong learning. Not all staff and Commissioners are going to think that diversity, equity, and inclusion is a priority or that it is even necessary. However, it is important that if that is your position, to support the consensus to move forward and to not obstruct the process.

## Resources

The following list is a small representation of resources that may assist the Commission with its DEI Plan.

### **Books**

*Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* by Layla Saad

*Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, 10th ed. by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

*Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

*Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* by Derald Wing Sue

*Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson

*The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson

*So, You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo

*They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei

*Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* by Derald Wing Sue

*Diversity Beyond Lip Service* by La Wanna Harris

*Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi

### **Articles**

CRGC Future Forum Report

Forum One, "Why DEI is Important and Should be Prioritized",  
<https://www.forumone.com/ideas/why-and-how-to-prioritize-dei-at-your-organization/>

American Dance Therapy Association, "Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Action Planning",  
<https://www.adta.org/dei-strategic-planning-process>

University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion our Confronting Bias page (<https://equity.ucla.edu/know/confronting-bias/>)

UCLA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Implicit Bias (<https://equity.ucla.edu/know/implicit-bias/>)

The Diversity Movement (information provided to Joanna Kaiserman)

**Training**

Harvard University Implicit Bias Assessment: Project Impact,  
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

**Organizations**

Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)

American Planning Association (APA)

International City/County Management Association (ICMA)