



Research

OVCERGE Equity and Diversity Committee (EAD)

Wisconsin Energy Institute

From a grassroots gathering to a newly chartered committee, members of the Wisconsin Energy Institute (WEI) have come together to help integrate equity, justice, and inclusion into the institute's research, education and outreach activities.

Like many others on campus, WEI employees were inspired during the summer of 2020 to examine how diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) intersect with the institute's mission and how our work represents these principles. Approximately 20 members of the Wisconsin Energy Institute started gathering on Zoom for what would become the first "Wisconsin Energy Institute Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force" meetings. With no predetermined structure, the group of staff, undergraduate and graduate students and scientists spent the first few sessions envisioning what we could do to make our workplace—and our work—more equitable, inclusive, and centered on justice. We used a [Google slide deck filled with text bubbles](#) to anonymously brainstorm ideas, which ranged in scope from creating a DEI-themed borrowing library in our building to forming new research partnerships and updating human resources practices. The group then sorted the ideas into categories, such as "Leadership Buy-In" and "Staff Training," and identified whether they were achievable in the short or long term.

In ongoing monthly meetings, the task force focused on one or two categories of ideas at a time and voted on which actions to prioritize. Although some ideas have been easier to implement than others, we're happy to report progress in several areas to date:

- **Centering justice in public programs.** We immediately refocused some of our public programming, such as the monthly [Forward in Energy Forums](#), to highlight energy justice and how it connects with social arenas such as housing, jobs, and climate adaptation and mitigation. These efforts also pushed us to think more broadly about what equity and inclusion look like for a campus center. While recruiting external experts to provide more diverse viewpoints at our events, for example, we need to make sure we are being equitable about providing honorariums for the labor of our speakers.
- **Internal staff training and engagement.** We started offering more professional development and education opportunities for our staff and scientists. These included formal opportunities like [WISELI's Breaking the Bias Habit](#) training, which we offered to faculty, staff, and students at multiple universities during the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center's Annual Science Meeting, as well as

informal gatherings, such as monthly “Lunch and Learn” conversation groups and a WEI-staff led book club. The book club started with the OVCERGE’s book club on *How to be an Antiracist*, by Ibram X.Kendi, and continued with *Revolutionary Power: An Activist’s Guide to the Energy Transition* by Shalanda Baker, now the Deputy Director for Energy Justice at the U.S. Department of Energy. In these gatherings, we focus on establishing safe spaces to learn from each other and build community.

- **Dedicated staff time.** As we increased our opportunities for engagement, we’ve found that it can be hard for staff to dedicate time to extra activities such as the task force or trainings. We worked with WEI leadership and our division HR in coordination with the UW–Madison TTC effort to enable WEI operational staff to formally designate 5% of their position description (PD) on record to reflect “collaboration time.” Employees who opted in now have the following duty listed on their PD: “5% - Participates in collaborative activities to promote an equitable, diverse, and inclusive WEI community and foster a culture that welcomes, celebrates, and supports everyone.” The hope is that embedding this language in the PD will make participation feel more like an integral part of one’s job and less like an elective activity. We are currently brainstorming ways to be able to offer our grant-funded research staff the same opportunity.

As we neared the one-year mark, task force members decided it was time to give our group a more formal structure. With inspiration from other groups on and off-campus, we drafted a charter and formed the WEI Equity, Diversity and Community Committee. A committee chair and chair-elect will facilitate the group and several subcommittees, such as community, communications, and training, will organize and implement new initiatives. Members will be appointed on an annual basis, and a call for new members is currently underway.

We see these efforts as the beginning of a sustained commitment to making equity and justice a central part of our work to advance clean energy systems. Our hope is that with the new charter, structure, and more clearly defined goals and expectations, the Equity, Diversity and Community Committee will make WEI a more inclusive and welcoming community.

To learn more about this effort, contact Allison Bender at agbender@wisc.edu