



October 30, 2020

TO: AEP Board of Directors

FROM: Inclusion and Diversity Committee  
(Ms. Claudia Garcia and Ms. Marie Campbell)

SUBJECT: AEP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative

Ms. Marie Campbell and Ms. Claudia Garcia met and reviewed selected published literature as a basis for beginning to outline the steps to be considered by the California Association of Environmental Professionals (AEP) in an *Inclusion and Diversity Initiative* that will facilitate equity within the AEP and its influence on environmental professionals and environmental practice.

### ***Working Definitions***

***Diversity:*** Individuals who represent differences in race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, and age.

***Equity:*** Justice, impartiality, and fairness within procedures, processes, and distributions of resources/opportunities.

***Inclusion:*** Diverse individuals participating fully in decision-making processes, professional development, and leadership opportunities within the AEP.

In a simple dance party analogy provided by Michael C. Bush, Chief Executive Officer at Great Place to Work, and author of *A Great Place to Work for All*, diversity is asking a diverse group of people to the dance, inclusion is inviting the diverse guests to dance, and equity is ensuring all guests who want to dance have an opportunity to do so.

## **Background**

It is understood that the American Planning Association (APA) has initiated a comparable process which is available at the following link:

<https://www.planning.org/diversity/>

This short paper provides a summary of the eight (8) steps to support an *Inclusion and Diversity Initiative* for consideration by the AEP Board of Directors:

### **1. Establish a sense of belonging for everyone.**

The ability for the AEP to function as a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable professional organization and influence the industry is best served by establishing a culture where all environmental professionals have an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging. Currently, AEP membership is dominated by people who work at environmental consulting firms. State, regional, county, and city public agencies or agency employees are also members and/or participate regularly in AEP conferences, workshops, and chapter events. There are also several environmental law firms that have historically been active within the organization. While many AEP members have been environmental professionals since before the California AEP was established, there is also a large percentage of students and young professionals. As evidenced by the diversity data that was presented to the Board during the November 2019 meeting, there are many other types of emerging and seasoned environmental professionals who are AEP members including environmental engineers, environmental planners, environmental scientists, environmental advocates, educators, and students (Appendix A, *AEP Diversity Initiative Introduction*). As the AEP reaches out to prospective and existing members, it is important to acknowledge that there are many different types of environmental professionals and these collective voices are more representative of the state's diverse needs.

*Recommendation:* With a goal of initiating a dialogue and a sense of belonging, the AEP shall ask existing members to contact each person who either expresses interest in joining the AEP, joins the AEP, or attends an AEP event. Integrating diversity and inclusion training for the AEP would allow its members to be aware of how important a culture of inclusion is to building an organization that is reflective of California's rich diversity.

### **2. Empathetic leadership is key.**

Empathy is a competency like no other skill that can make a big difference when it comes to leadership. Empathy means being able to understand the needs of others and being aware of their thoughts and feelings. At its core, leadership is ultimately about others. The concept of empathetic leadership applies to all professional organizations, especially the AEP, in much the same way that it applies to a business or a public agency. The greater the capacity of the leadership to understand and address the needs of those participating in the organization or seeking to participate in the organization, the more likely members and prospective members will realize the optimal benefits of affiliation with the California AEP. In its most recent messaging, the Executive Committee and Board have pro-actively made clear the AEP's position regarding current social issues that affect members and prospective members, in the same manner that those issues

affect society at large. The AEP Board of Directors acted to adjust the bylaws to reflect zero tolerance for any type of harassment. More recently, the Executive Committee issued a letter regarding the need for reformation to ensure all individuals have equal rights and security.

*Recommendation:* The AEP shall require that all internal and external communications should include language that is inclusive of the broad range of environmental professionals who practice or are training to practice in California including, but not limited to, State Institute, and Chapter conferences, workshops, webinars, and events. In addition, the AEP shall integrate leadership training for the development of environmental professionals and their project management skills in a manner that supports their continued learning and advancement in the profession. The AEP shall work to elevate diverse voices when identifying potential speakers and encourage local chapters to do the same. It is important that individuals are committed to mentoring and lifting the next generation of community leaders. The AEP will also work to identify additional opportunities to share the AEP's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion via online and in-person platforms as an ongoing initiative.

### **3. A top-down approach is not enough.**

The opportunity exists for AEP leadership—through the Executive Board, Board, and Chapter Boards—to demonstrate its commitment to the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a manner that influences both members and non-members in the environmental profession.

*Recommendation:* Up to \$20K of funding in the 2021 Budget for the AEP Board of Directors to attend training related to behaviors that a) facilitate inclusion and genuine support of diversity and b) define specific opportunities to developing new behaviors that are integrated into all aspects of AEP management and operations, in a manner that is accessible to member and non-member environmental professionals and prospective environmental professionals. This includes:

- Marketing and advertising of the AEP including its website, traditional media, and social media
- Coordination with OPR and State Legislature
- Support of educators at all levels engaged in the environmental sciences
- Consideration of environmental justice in relation to the legislative platform
- Educational programming
- Conferences
- Awards and recognitions

Specifically, improved practices should be integrated into standard operation procedures.

### **4. Quotas do not automate inclusion.**

Targeting certain groups for inclusion has the potential to sustain an “Us-vs-Them” mentality. Rather than setting quotas, the AEP shall encourage overall inclusion that supports a concept of “Us” that is specifically environmental professionals who currently, or are training to, practice in California.

*Recommendation:* The AEP shall update its website, AEP Chapter websites, and social media messages to include messaging that resonates with all types of environmental professionals and prospective environmental professionals. The AEP shall utilize its platforms to elevate diverse voices and serve as a gateway for emerging professionals to enter the field.

**5. Inclusion is ongoing—not one-off training.**

The AEP considers diversity, equity, and inclusion as a long-term commitment rather than a simplified one-time training.

*Recommendation:* Based on 2021 training of the AEP Board of Directors, the AEP shall develop materials for incorporation in the AEP Board orientation to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion in its Chapter Boards orientation materials.

**6. Maximize joy and connection; Minimize fear.**

Unfortunately, it is human nature to react negatively to change. The published literature recommends finding a way to frame the change through a lens of possibilities and using shared experiences and storytelling to communicate change in a positive way.

*Recommendation:* The AEP shall expand the use of video to share the diverse stories of its members and how they came to participate in the AEP. The AEP shall look beyond the AEP and Chapter websites for sharing this information and consider proactively sharing information with entities that employ environmental professionals.

**7. Forget “fit” and focus on helping individuals thrive.**

It is important to shift the focus from defining a list of parameters for those who “fit” the organization to how diverse professionals embody AEP values, mission, and purpose.

*Recommendations:* The AEP shall identify organizations that employ, train, and provide volunteering opportunities for environmental professionals. The AEP will invite said organizations and their team members to support the AEP mission by sharing their stories, experiences, and knowledge in a way that inspires and motivates new and advancing environmental professionals.

**8. Consider the brand.**

It is important to consider the messaging that is embodied in the services that the AEP provides. Inviting a broader cross-section of environmental professionals may require the consideration of tools that serve the needs of a broader coalition of environmental professionals.

*Recommendation:* The AEP shall challenge its members to consider diversity, equity, and inclusion in the ways that AEP members work together and communicate internally and externally. There will be careful consideration regarding the potential benefits of investing in a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This applies to identifying workshop content, conference panels, and speakers; coordinating with community groups; and assisting emerging professionals with finding their preferred career path.

## ***References***

Florentine, Sharon. 14 February 2019. "Diversity and Inclusion: 8 Best Practices for Changing Your Culture." IDG Communications Inc. Available at: <https://www.cio.com/article/3262704/diversity-and-inclusion-8-best-practices-for-changing-your-culture.html>

Leiter, Jeffrey, Nicolas Solebello, and Mary Tschirhart. 2011. "Enhancing Diversity and Inclusion in Membership Associations." NC State University Institute for Non-Profits: Advancing Association and Non-profit Leadership.