



delta institute 

Delta Institute's staff and boards visit project partners at South Merrill Community Garden in South Shore, Chicago

ADVANCING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION AT DELTA INSTITUTE: AN UPDATE

MAY 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Delta Institute: An Update..... 4

Appendix A: Organizational Community Engagement Stipend Policy..... 10

Appendix B: Statements of Inclusive Population Language..... 12

Appendix C: Black Labor Acknowledgement..... 14

Appendix D: Land Acknowledgement..... 15

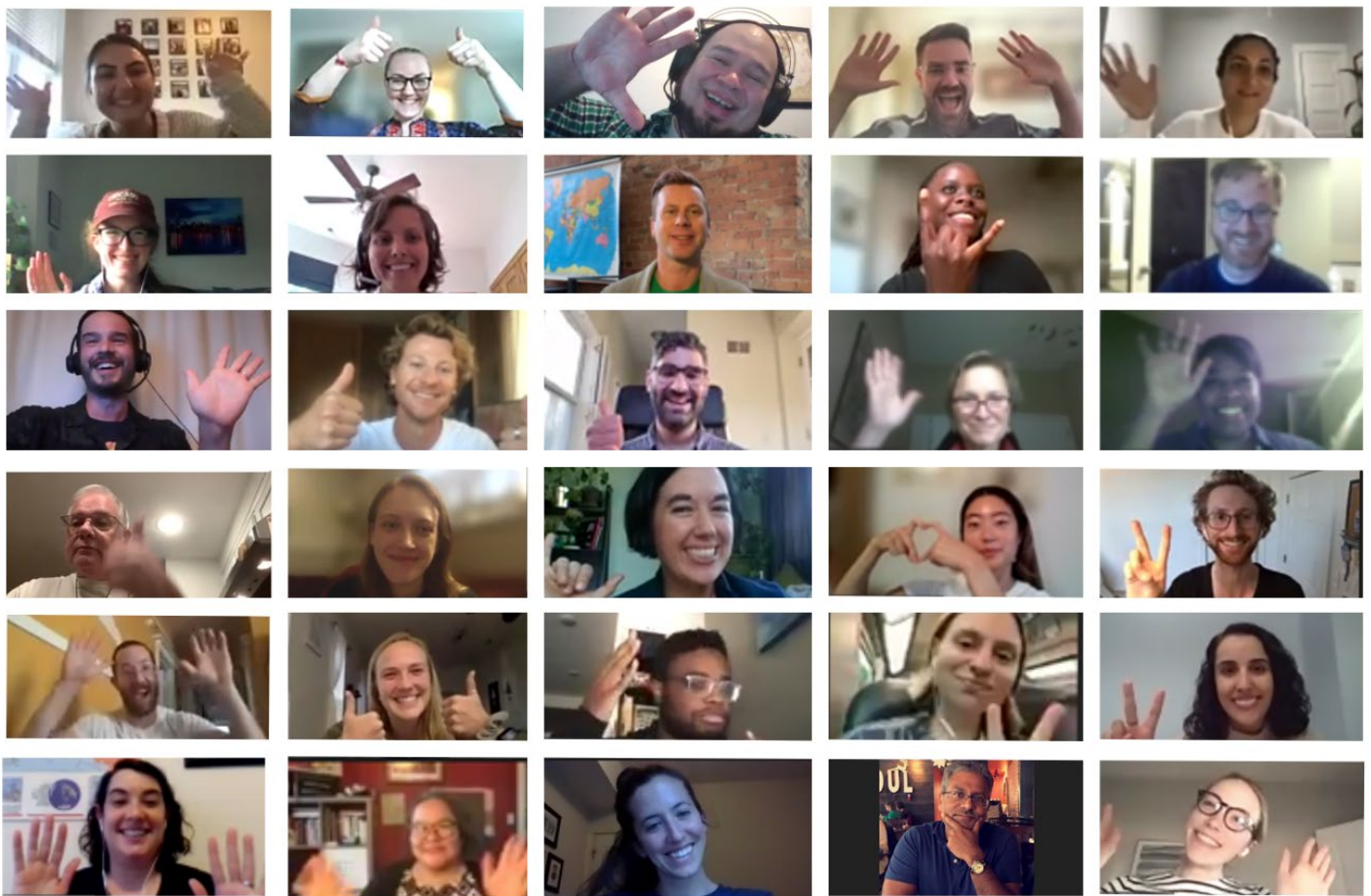
References and Additional Resources 16

ADVANCING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION AT DELTA INSTITUTE: AN UPDATE

Introduction

At our core, we at Delta Institute are an organization that is defined by its people and our impact, and we can only be successful in advancing our mission and vision if we are intentional and authentic in our approach to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in all aspects of our organizational culture and programming.

Over the past few years, we have committed ourselves to being more transparent with our partners, supporters, and stakeholders regarding our approach to advancing DEI at Delta Institute. It is in this same spirit that we offer this short update about where we've been, what we're working on, and what we're looking toward for the future at Delta Institute.



Collage of photos taken from online Delta Mixers hosted for staff, governing board, and associate board members throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

In January 2021, Delta Institute completed an 18-month planning period to identify, explore, and strengthen our goals related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Delta recognized in Spring 2019 that we need to evolve to better serve our community partners to achieve our shared vision of a thriving Midwest. This means that we must be authentic and inclusive at our fundamental core, ensuring that we do not contribute to legacy injustices that the 501c3 sector has indirectly/directly perpetuated.

To face this reality headfirst, Delta convened a DEI Committee composed of staff, associate board, and governing board members to create a comprehensive overview of our approach to DEI, with clearly defined and actionable recommendations so that our work results in actual, verifiable change within the organization at all levels. Being candid, we simply could not continue doing “business as usual” if we want to be a genuine and inclusive partner.

Our Objectives

The DEI Committee set forth to help further the following objectives for Delta Institute:

- Full integration of DEI into all internal processes and structures for our board and staff, and external processes and structure for engaging with our partners, communities, stakeholders, and supporters.
- Create a shared awareness, understanding and language around DEI principles.
- Create a supportive, respectful, and trusted environment for challenging conversations around these personal and complex issues.
- No one-off stuff: true integration will create a cycle of continuous experimentation, failure, and improvement that will strengthen the organization.
- Create actionable strategies to meet our objectives, with an understanding that there are true systemic issues that influence what is possible and practicable for our organization.
- Increase the cultural competencies of the organization.
- Acknowledge, identify, and reduce inherent biases in our processes, structures, and culture.
- Increase diverse representation and accessibility throughout Delta’s staff, board, partners, funders, stakeholders, and supporters.

DEI Committee’s Executive Summary

In the spirit of collaboration and transparency, we published our DEI Executive Summary online in March 2021 to share more about where we’ve been and where we’re going as an organization. We used this—as well as several of the other resources produced by the DEI Committee—to advance multiple other activities referenced in the following section of this document. Our commitment to DEI does not conclude simply because a committee concludes its work or because we publish an executive summary—a true, authentic commitment to DEI requires continuous learning and action.

[Click here](https://delta-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Delta-Institute-DEI-Committee-Executive-Summary-March-2021.pdf) to download the executive summary or visit <https://delta-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Delta-Institute-DEI-Committee-Executive-Summary-March-2021.pdf>.

Updates: What We've Been Working On



Left: Governing board of directors attend 2022 board retreat at South Shore Cultural Center in Chicago.
Right: Delta Emerging Leaders at BOOST 2022 held at Ed Kaplan Family Institute for Innovation and Tech Entrepreneurship at Illinois Tech.

Acting upon the findings and recommendations of Delta's DEI Committee, we set forth to implement several new policies and activities to further advance our DEI objectives.

Revising Organizational Branding for Improved Accessibility

We recognized that certain aspects of our branding guidelines were not as accessible as we'd like them to be. In order for the tools, resources, publications, and other content we produce to be used effectively, they must have accessibility in mind. For us, this meant updating the color, size, and style of fonts we use—or by more intentionally welcoming the sharing of personal pronouns in shared spaces and email communications. As such, we published a new Communications Manual in June 2021 for staff with a focus on accessibility and brand cohesion.

Using the DEI Committee's Work to Inform Delta's Refined Strategic Plan

At the time, we recognized that Delta's strategic plan was not reflective of who we truly were at the time, or who we wanted to be. As such, Delta's staff and board worked together, using Delta's approach to DEI as a foundational cornerstone, to develop a refined strategic plan for July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2025.

Developing an Organizational Community Engagement Stipend Policy

We believe that redevelopment without community voice and inclusion is racist, classist, extractive, and perpetuates legacy injustices. In an effort to ensure that we provide equitable compensation for community members participating in planning efforts, Delta published a board-approved Organizational Community Engagement Stipend Policy in August 2022. The policy is published publicly at <https://delta-institute.org/stipend> and in Appendix A of this document.

Refining Our Approach to Using Inclusive Vocabulary

Following feedback and questions we received regarding Delta's approach to using inclusive vocabulary, we refined and communicated our approach. We believe and affirm that inclusive communications are built upon the foundation of both respecting and reflecting how people identify themselves as aligned with their cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, as well as their

gender, sexual, and orientation identities. As such, we published these board-approved statements on our refined approach in August 2022. Our approach is published publicly online at <https://delta-institute.org/inclusive-vocabulary> and in Appendix B of this document.

Developing a Black Labor Acknowledgement

We recognize that the United States, both as we know it today and as we all have lived within it over the course of our respective lives, was built at the fatal and extractive expense of forcefully enslaved Black/African American people. We acknowledge that while fighting for their own lives and civil liberties that Black/African American people have envisioned a world which is better for all of humanity—so all of us may live more equitably and justly. As such, Delta’s board approved a Black Labor Acknowledgement in March 2023. This acknowledgement is published online at <https://delta-institute.org/black-labor-acknowledgement> and in Appendix C of this document.

Developing a Land Acknowledgement

We recognize that we cannot be authentic in our goal of creating a more resilient home for all Midwesterners without celebrating the incalculable contributions, lessons, and methodologies to our society that stem from Indigenous wisdom—as well as recognizing the trauma, past and present, resulting from the colonization of Indigenous people. As such, Delta’s board approved a Land Acknowledgement in March 2023. This acknowledgement is published online at <https://delta-institute.org/land-acknowledgement> and in Appendix D of this document.

Integrating More Accessibility Features on Our Website

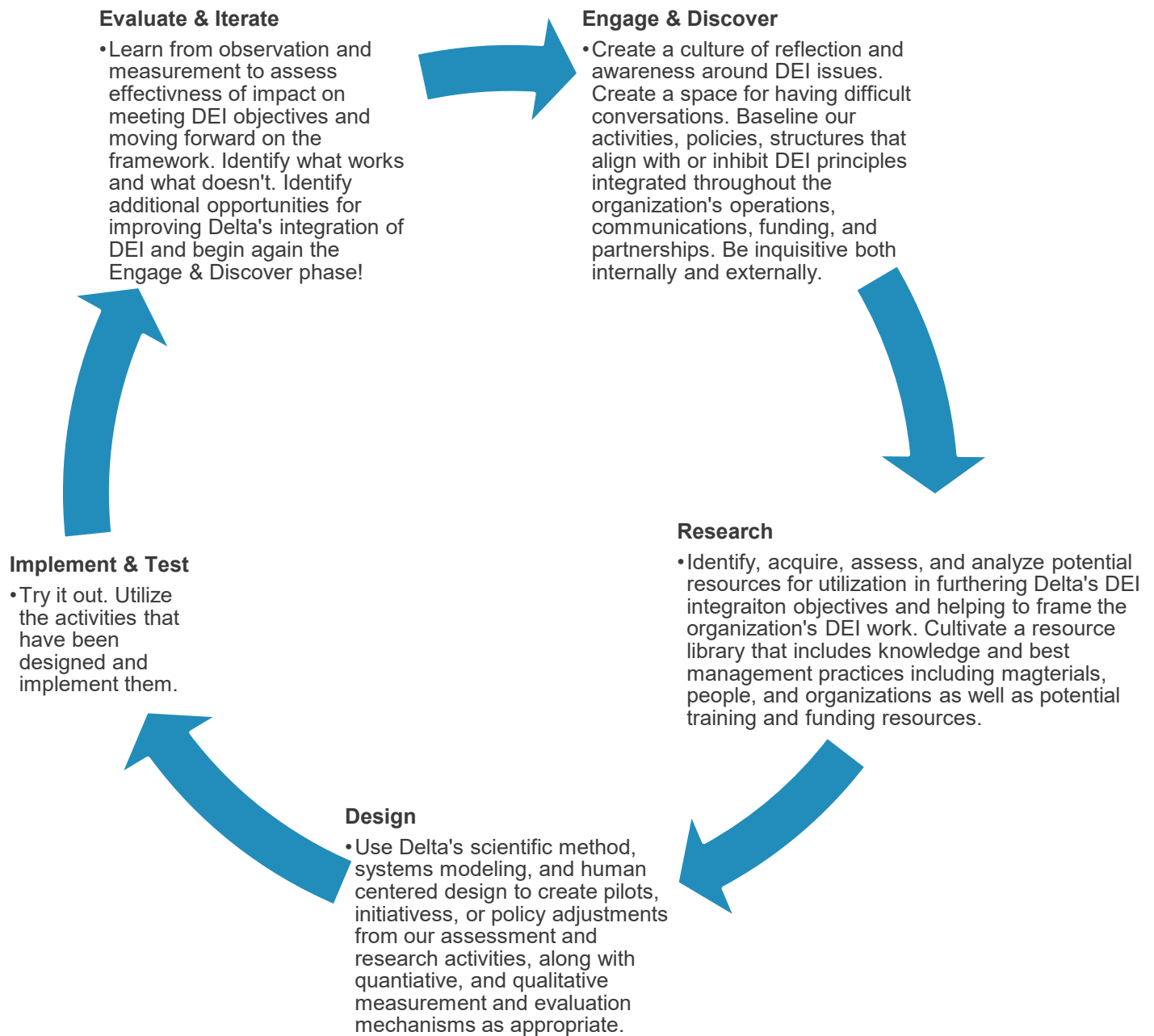
While refreshing our website to better align with our strategic plan and updated branding guidelines, we integrated a widget provided by [Userway](#) to further promote accessibility on our website in April 2023. Doing so goes beyond baseline compliance with standard Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 by offering more features for users with visual impairments, dyslexia, ADHD, and more.

Ongoing DEI Processes and Procedures

We have advanced all of the preceding activities while continuing other DEI processes and procedures at Delta Institute: salary transparency in our job postings and internal compensation practices, annual surveys to benchmark inclusivity and representation at Delta, annual reviews of onboarding and orientation materials for new staff and board members, annual votes by Delta’s governing board to review and reaffirm Delta’s Statement of Commitment to DEI, and several more.

Our Next Steps

To truly create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization, we must continuously invest in a cycle that helps us assess what we’ve put in place, explore how we can improve upon it, and refine it as needed to further reach our objectives. Throughout our DEI work, we have done so by applying our organizational theory of change to reach our objectives, as summarized in the figure on the next page.



The time has come for us to revisit the steps to Evaluate & Iterate as well as Engage & Discover our overarching work to date. We are doing so by:

- **Evaluating our Work in this Update and an Organizational Belief Statement:** In addition to helping maintain accountability and transparency with our stakeholders, this update also serves as a tool to guide us as an organization on the work we've accomplished over the past few years, and where else we seek to head in the next phase of our work.

- **Engaging and Discovering through an Organization-wide DEI Training:** Over the years, we have hosted DEI capacity-building trainings separately for our staff, associate board, and governing board. We have long awaited an opportunity to develop a DEI training curriculum where all three groups can be engaged simultaneously at an organization-wide training. We are pleased to share that we are currently planning for our first organization-wide DEI training later this summer, where we can reflect on our DEI activities to date, increase our competency around DEI issues—both individually and collectively, and begin exploring more opportunities to further advance our goals of becoming a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable organization.



Left: Patrick T. Murphy (staff), Niharika Hanglem (governing board), and Sidney Freitag-Fey (staff) attend BOOST 2022. *Right:* Claire Costelloe and Mackenzie Manley Buchek attend the Delta staff retreat in August 2022.

We'd love to hear from you!

Questions or comments? Drop us a note by emailing our CEO, Bill Schleizer, at wschleizer@delta-institute.org or by calling us at 312-554-0900. We are pleased to provide this update with all our stakeholders to demonstrate where we've been, where we are, and where we're headed—and we are grateful for everyone who has shared their thoughts, feedback, ideas, and support for this work along each step of the journey!

APPENDIX A: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STIPEND POLICY

Purpose and Intent

Delta Institute (Delta) is committed to equitably compensating our partners to fully value their expertise, skills, and time. We believe that redevelopment without community voice and inclusion is racist, classist, extractive, and perpetuates legacy injustices. Furthermore, by providing equitable compensation, Delta can create a more inclusive environment where more project partners may participate and share their voices, thereby ensuring a more successful project that addresses the community's needs and further fulfills Delta's mission.

Guidelines

When determining an equitable compensation policy for community partners, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can serve each unique community's needs. Delta will use the following guidelines when working with project partners to determine equitable compensation rates for participants.

- **Build upon mutual trust and respect:** Community engagement and collaboration between Delta and project partners must be built upon a foundation of building mutual trust and respect as well as the sharing of power, benefits, and leadership.
- **Communication with project partners:** Open and honest communication between Delta and project partners will help determine equitable compensation rates. Because place-based community leaders and representatives know their communities best, they may be able to help provide the best insights in determining fair and equitable compensation.
- **Advance planning:** Consider working with project partners in advance to help determine an estimated community engagement stipend. This not only demonstrates to prospective funders that equitable compensation is a priority, but it also helps ensure an inclusive planning process at a project's earliest stages.
- **Assessing median income:** While assessing the local median income can help inform compensation, over-reliance on these figures can reinforce economic inequities impacting the communities with whom we are partnering. Compensation rates that mirror income rates in low-to-moderate income communities would only further perpetuate inequitable pay.
- **Considerations for unbanked or underbanked communities.** About one quarter of US residents are unbanked or underbanked, meaning that they do not have access to—or choose not to use—a checking, savings, or money market account and/or rely on alternative forms of financial service. This can be especially true in rural communities and communities with large portions of undocumented immigrants. Delta, along with project partner leaders, should take this into consideration when planning for community stipends. Depending on the community's needs, failure to consider this may result in a less inclusive project process where not all community voices are heard. When possible, Delta should first consider asking trusted place-based project partners to disburse Delta's stipends. In other circumstances, Delta should consider if alternative compensation approaches, other than check distributions, may be necessary to mitigate additional burdens or barriers for participation.

Legal considerations

When determining equitable compensation for project partners, Delta must also consider legal implications from federal, state, and local laws. For example, Delta must consider the following guidelines from the US Department of Labor:

- If a volunteer is paid a stipend of over \$500 per year, or more than 20% of what a typical employee would be paid for the same service, the volunteer must be classified as an employee of the organization. As such, nonprofits should not pay more than a nominal 20% of what an employer would otherwise pay for the same service.
- Organizations should not offer volunteers the same benefits that paid employees receive.
- Organizations should clearly state that if a volunteer receives more than \$500 in a year for compensation, they may be considered an employee and no longer receive protection from liability claims by the Federal Volunteer Protection Act.

Suggested framework for project budget considerations for community partners

Partner Type	Hour Range	Experience Range	Investment Range	Notes and Considerations
Community Group without formal legal status	1-25 Hours	Low-Moderate Direct Experience	\$2,500-5,000 based on specific scope	If beyond hour/experience range, please see below note.
Resident and/or Individual Person	1-20 Hours max	Low-Moderate Direct Experience	\$25.00 per hour (\$500.00 max), plus travel reimbursement	If beyond hour/experience range, please see Legal section.
501c3 Nonprofit	10+ Hours	Moderate-High Direct Experience	Contract Scope Basis	Contractual scope to determine exact hours, activities, and related fees/investment.

If hours or experience is to be exceeded beyond the above, then bespoke contracting/stipends will be determined with the partner to respect their incurred costs (inclusive of time spent).

Additional considerations for inclusive participation

Ensuring community inclusion also extends beyond equitable compensation. It is important for Delta to consider how to best host inclusive meetings and events for projects. We encourage Delta's staff and boards to refer to *Delta's Inclusive Events & Meetings Protocols Guide*.

APPENDIX B: STATEMENTS OF INCLUSIVE POPULATION LANGUAGE

On Racial and Ethnic Identity

Delta Institute (Delta) recognizes that many communities of color (inclusive of BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color), particularly those in the United States, self-identify using different terminology.

We believe and affirm that inclusive communications are built upon the foundation of both respecting and reflecting how people identify themselves as aligned with their personal/ household culture and identity. As such, we prioritize using the preferred terminology of our place-based, in-community partners. In circumstances where specific partner information is unavailable, we seek to use vocabulary that prioritizes inclusion, though we also recognize that communities of color are not monoliths and cannot speak for everyone's individual experience.

For example, in organizational documents we may use the terms *Latina*, *Latine*, *Latino*, or *Latinx* to refer to US residents of Latin-American descent, though we acknowledge and celebrate the many other ways in which these community members wish to self-identify. This is the same approach that we take with all racial and ethnic identities, and we welcome feedback from our partners and in-community persons so that we may continue to adapt and uphold our commitment to using respectful and inclusive language.

On Gender, Sex, and Orientation Identity

Delta Institute (Delta) welcomes and celebrates that people identify through a broad spectrum of gender, sexual, and orientation identities. Furthermore, we recognize that the dynamic nature of what it means to be “female” and “male” does not fully incorporate all persons—and should evolve.

We are devoted to publishing communications with a commitment to inclusion, though we recognize that our organizational documents may not fully reflect all identities by name. Nevertheless, we remain committed to supporting those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Non-binary, Genderfluid, Two-spirit, and all other gender/sexual expressions. We welcome feedback from our partners and in-community persons so that we may continue to adapt and uphold our commitment to using respectful and inclusive language.

About these Statements

Delta Institute developed both preceding statements on racial and ethnic identity and on gender, sex, and orientation identity to publicly share our approach to using inclusive vocabulary. These statements build upon the guidelines of Delta's Inclusive Vocabulary Guide, a resource created by our ad hoc Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Committee between 2019-2021. Most notably, these statements are built upon our guidance for self-identification:

Self-identification: While this document is intended to provide guidance regarding preferred vocabulary and stylization, its contents are neither definitive nor exhaustive. When communicating with and about our partners, it is important to use the preferred vocabulary of our partners so that we may best reflect how they wish to self-identify. Inclusive communications are built upon the foundation of respecting and reflecting how people choose to describe themselves. To avoid assuming, Delta recommends asking partners for any vocabulary they prefer to use in our communications. (Delta Institute, 2021)

We recognize racism has been—and continues to be—a significant factor in contributing to the environmental, economic, and social problems Delta seeks to collaboratively solve with our partners. As such, we wish to highlight specific racial/ethnic terminology recommended through our Inclusive Vocabulary Guide when specific partner preferences are unavailable. This terminology, while not exhaustive, includes person of color, people of color, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), Black, African American, Latina, Latino, Latinx, Asian-American, Arab-American, American Indian, Native American, and Indigenous. We also recognize that context matters when using the above terminology and that different circumstances may require additional explanation. For example, we understand that other terminology must be used accordingly when referring to specific laws, policies, or other legal documentation, such as the terms Minority, Minorities, or Hispanic.

Usage

We recommend that Delta Institute’s staff, Board of Directors, and Delta Emerging Leaders associate board, incorporate these statements into our publications, resources, and online media.

For more information

We welcome your thoughts, questions, and contributions for further discussion. You can learn more about our diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts by [clicking here](#), by [emailing us](#), or by calling us at 312-554-0900. We also encourage you to join us in learning more about these issues by reviewing the references provided at the end of this document.

APPENDIX C: BLACK LABOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Delta Institute recognizes that the United States, both as we know it as of today and as we all have lived within it over the course of our respective lives, was built at the fatal and extractive expense of forcefully enslaved Black/African American people. We acknowledge and remember those who did not survive the Middle Passage; those who were beaten and lynched on American soil; those whose personal wealth was forcibly taken/extracted; those who are confined by societal barriers that inhibit personal and familial security and access; and those who died and are still dying while fighting for their freedom. We mourn the continued persecution, exclusion, and murder of Black/African American persons, and call on us all to work to address these traumas that manifest today.

Delta Institute acknowledges that while fighting for their own lives and civil liberties that Black/African American people have envisioned a world which is better for all of humanity—so all of us may live more equitably and justly. We call witness to not just the past, but the incalculable contributions and opportunities that the Black/African American community has provided to our society.

We call on white-led and white-majority organizations, like ourselves, to reject extraction and co-option of these Black/African American contributions, to instead center meaningful investment and collaboration on a shared vision of equitable environmental and economic outcomes for the Midwest.

Words without action do not address historical and current social ills. Please engage with the wide array of (as these are but a few of many) Black/African American-led [organizations](#) who are working today to [champion justice](#), [uplift](#), [restore](#), and [heal](#). Please continue learning more about Black/African American accomplishments and consider how we all may collectively work together to create genuine inclusivity, access, and benefit for everyone.

APPENDIX D: LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Delta Institute acknowledges that we reside on the traditional and current land of the Kickapoo, Kaskaskia, Potawatomi, Peoria, Wyandotte, Delaware, and many other nations. The members of these nations were the original caretakers and stewards of the land before their removal, persecution, discrimination, and erasure that continues to this day. Delta Institute cannot be authentic in our goal of creating a more resilient home for all Midwesterners without recognizing the trauma, past and present, resulting from the colonization of Indigenous people.

We cannot be authentic without also celebrating the incalculable contributions, lessons, and methodologies to our society that stem from Indigenous wisdom. We recognize and act with gratitude that Indigenous design has directly and fundamentally benefited the environmental sector and our thinking. Indeed, most of the conservation practices implemented at Delta Institute result from Indigenous practices. Indigenous culture infuses all that we do—such as the use of natural design, flood and climate resiliency practices, community-based support mechanisms, and a vast array of approaches, philosophies and wisdom that stem from Indigenous lived experience.

We call on white-led and white-majority organizations, like ourselves, to reject extraction and co-option of Indigenous design and wisdom, to instead center meaningful investment and engage in authentic collaboration for a shared vision of equitable environmental and economic outcomes for the Midwest.

Words without action do not address historical and current social ills. [Please learn more](#) about the history of Indigenous nations on land that Delta Institute and our projects currently occupy, [how these Indigenous communities thrive today](#), and how we may all holistically and equitably uplift.

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