

**Racial Equity Summit**  
**Igniting Authentic Racial Equity**

**North Carolina State University**  
**October 15, 2020**

**Executive Summary**  
**February 9, 2021**

“Authentic Racial Equity goes beyond uncovering racism and correcting inequities – it focuses on a higher purpose – building a flourishing environment that works for everyone.”

Joretha Johnson, CEO/President  
Advanced Transformational Technologies  
2020



## Introduction

NC State's culture exists within the context of the United States' social, political and cultural climate. Considering this context as well as our nation's history of slow progress in addressing racism, understandable and genuine feelings of anger, distrust, uncertainty, fear and fatigue are to be expected when approaching the topic of igniting authentic racial equity. Acknowledging the challenges of the times and the complexity of the topic, the will and determination to move the university forward remains paramount and urgent. The Appreciative Inquiry-based Racial Equity Summit was designed to transition tension into enthusiasm for change, cynicism into hope, and inaction into sustained cooperative commitment and real progress.

The Racial Equity Summit brought together over 70 NC State University students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni and community stakeholders via a 4-hour virtual forum to gather meaningful personal input from across the community about what racial equity might look like at NC State from a qualitative perspective. This work is being blended with other efforts to help chart the university's way forward in its work toward racial equity.

The Appreciative Inquiry process begins by identifying an affirmative topic focused on how NC State could work on **Igniting Authentic Racial Equity**. Provocative, aspirational statements about igniting authentic racial equity provided the basis for small group discussions among the participants of the Summit in order to better understand the attitudes, behaviors, customs, culture and policies that NC State could utilize to ignite authentic racial equity.

## The Context for the Summit

NC State, like most institutions of higher education, has had numerous programs and initiatives over decades aimed at addressing racial equity. While progress has been made over time, there is still much work to be done, as feelings and experiences of bias, inequality and cultural barriers persist. Minoritized populations, such as people of color and women, are unevenly impacted by persistent inequities and an environment in which the status quo frequently perpetuates those inequities.

Several notable events during the spring and summer of 2020, including the murder of George Floyd and subsequent calls to action across the nation to address racial inequities, intensified the urgency to do even more to advance NC State's efforts in this area. In July 2020, the Coalition of Black Student Organizations submitted a petition outlining specific actions desired for advancing Black student life at NC State. Chancellor Randy Woodson and other university leaders committed to implementing all of the items outlined in the student petition and named several additional university-level initiatives aimed at addressing racial inequality. These commitments were accompanied by a genuine acknowledgement that ongoing efforts to address systemic racism will require strong leadership, unending commitment, accountability, sustained effort and ongoing community engagement.

Chancellor Woodson tasked Vice Provost for Institutional Equity & Diversity Sheri Schwab to convene a Racial Equity Summit in fall 2020. Chancellor Woodson's vision for the Summit was to provide a platform to provide a diverse, inclusive and equitable convening that would form the basis for reframing and accelerating ongoing, community-driven efforts to improve the Black experience at NC State.

Given the imperative for improvement at all levels – structural, organizational, cultural and individual – it was necessary to go beyond traditional approaches to the issue. Conducting climate surveys, holding town halls and launching a new task force are methods that had all been used before, but the times call for new thinking and a different approach. In addition, there was a strong need to create a sense of community while using virtual technology with a wide array of participants.

The Appreciative Inquiry format was chosen to conduct the Summit. Approaching the topic of racial equity through an affirmative versus deficit-based lens itself offered a different approach.

The goals of the Racial Equity Summit were to:

1. Increase self-awareness, mindfulness and support regarding authentic racial equity at NC State.
2. Bring about positive relationships through intentional community engagement.
3. Identify immediate, near-term changes as well as longer-term initiatives to incorporate into strategic plan goals and priorities.
4. Create and launch an accountability structure for ongoing identification, assessment and resolution or progress toward relevant issues.
5. Repeat with future equity-related summits regularly to infuse continuous engagement, make space for addressing equity issues for all groups, track improvements and communicate progress.

## **Key Take-Aways: Recognizing Authentic Racial Equity**

The Racial Equity Summit generated an authentic conversation about elements that are foundational to Igniting Authentic Racial Equity. Participants expressed an appreciation for bringing together leaders from across various constituencies to talk, listen and learn from each other. Participants repeatedly expressed an ongoing desire to develop deeper connections and to support one another. In addition, there was a clear message of hope from participants that the Summit would be the onset of positive change, while at the same time a fear that nothing would change.

For a majority of participants, the Appreciative Inquiry approach was a positive experience. According to post-Summit evaluation data, 75% of participants felt that the Summit “was a useful step toward achieving racial equity at NC State.” At the same time, some participants expressed frustration with the Appreciative Inquiry format, noting the belief that some identities are (or have been) marginalized and that some people are privileged makes it hard to define (or imagine) authentic racial equity.

The Racial Equity Summit confirmed that an authentic sense of racial equity is realized at a very personal level. The narratives and lived-experiences shared by participants support our ability to know what authentic racial equity looks and feels like, versus a theoretical definition. Within this individual experience of what authentic racial equity would entail, several common themes arose that are beneficial to creating a shared meaning of this important foundational concept and will be critical components of turning ideas into action moving forward.

## **Sense of Belonging**

Participants identified authentic racial equity as a deep sense of belonging, mutual ownership and support for the success of the person and the institution and a sense that one is welcomed to be a part of and included in something that is bigger than oneself – an ability to rise above or go beyond individual emotions or concerns.

Participants shared their experiences of the sense of racial equity through stories of supportive, family-like environments and recalled feeling unconditional acceptance – there was not a need to justify one’s presence or value.

## **Resilience and Empowerment**

Participants shared examples of experiencing authentic racial equity through stories of resilience or perseverance; of when they were able to successfully overcome obstacles or barriers that had been either socially or psychologically constructed.

Many participants connected authentic racial equity to the sense of being unstoppable and of being able to achieve a personal sense of empowerment, achievement or self-actualization despite the attitudes, behaviors or policies of others, i.e., “I know that racial equity exists because of who I am and where I am personally situated.” Participants described experiencing authentic racial equity as when they felt empowerment to make a difference.

One person described the experience of authentic racial equity as having the “superpower” of knowing that they “could accomplish anything!”

## **Expressing One’s True Self**

Through their stories, participants described authentic racial equity as a sense of realizing that people could be their true selves and still feel valued and accepted by others. In experiencing authentic racial equity, there was ultimately a sense of freedom and space to “be (and to be known as) who I was really meant to be.”

## **Desire to Influence Positive Change**

As a result of the Summit, many participants shared an expanded desire and ability to influence positive change. They became hopeful as they listened to diverse stories and experiences from trusted friends and colleagues, or from people representing other constituencies within the institution. Participants’ sense of hope was lifted as what they understood to be true about igniting racial equity was challenged through a positive and provocative method.

## **Existence of Negative Emotional Attractors**

The questions triggered strong negative emotional responses as well. Negative emotional attractors are the values, beliefs or attitudes preventing (or blocking) people from personally experiencing or igniting authentic racial equity. In some cases, participants were confronted by an existing wall of despair and engaged in conversations that reinforced distrust and fears that nothing would change.

When a sense of equity did not exist or was not generated within the activities of the Summit, it was difficult for participants to believe that an unconditional sense of belonging, or a broad-based, sustained ability to personally thrive and flourish, is possible. Consequently, it was challenging to maintain a positive inquiry for some discussion groups in those portions of the Summit, which further demonstrates and confirms that there are genuine and real obstacles to overcome. It can be very difficult to move beyond negative emotions regarding racial inequity, or to create a desire to build ongoing, trusting, respectful relationships in an environment that does not genuinely value or elicit authentic racial equity. Persistence of negative emotional attractors was identified as a limitation of the Summit or a circumstance where the goals were not fully achieved.

## **Racial Equity: Next Steps for Change**

The valuable insights gained from participant narratives describe and inform the foundation upon which to build a culture and an environment supporting authentic racial equity. Establishing this foundation – for example, by fostering a sense of belonging and empowering positive change – is both necessary and challenging to implement and sustain on a large scale. Progress will take sustained commitment, dedicated resources and thoughtful, continuous and collaborative action across all segments of NC State.

The Summit was structured in such a way that organizational leaders may pick up where the event left off in developing near- and long-term action steps, ultimately creating space for continuous engagement, improvements and communicating accomplishments. In addition, university leaders will infuse lessons learned from the Summit into new and ongoing commitments related to racial equity.

The following ideas present high-potential areas for improvement and focus, and arose repeatedly during the Summit across multiple groups:

1. Igniting authentic racial equity is going to take leadership and risk-taking – it requires a deep individual and organizational commitment to prioritize the resources needed to provide high impact practices for everyone.
2. Create opportunities to make personal connections to support a welcoming and inclusive environment. Suggestions include: Dialogue events, mentoring and networking events, opportunities to have space for thoughtful conversation about climate and culture.
3. Intentional recruitment and retention of Black employees and students.
4. Mentorship is an important factor; there is common wisdom and a consistent desire for further work and investment in this area (e.g., having someone to help guide or navigate the system, create opportunities and open doors).
5. Required DEI coursework for students and training for employees.

6. More clarity, cohesiveness, regularity and transparency of developing and reviewing progress towards tangible action items.
7. Authentic communication by leaders.

## Connecting and Aligning with Other Racial Equity Efforts

As noted in the introduction, Chancellor Woodson and the university leadership committed to several immediate actions aimed at addressing racial equity. Knowledge gained from the Summit will assist in enhancing the effectiveness of these initiatives as the university connects and aligns these complementary efforts.

### Current NC State Initiatives

- Join AAAS's SEA Change: NC State joined this national higher education effort, spearheaded by the prestigious American Academy for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS), as a charter member to review our policies and practices for faculty at a STEM university through an equity lens. This multi-year project is currently underway.
- Implement required DEI Training for all students, staff and faculty: The faculty module launched in August 2020; the staff and student modules launched February 1, 2021.
- Name Diversity, Equity and Inclusion as a university strategic plan goal, and include DEI into division and college-level plans: DEI has been developed as one of seven university goals. These goals are being vetted by the university community and will be considered for adoption by NC State's Board of Trustees in April 2021.
- Incorporate DEI into staff work plans: This item was put into place for the 2020-21 appraisal year as part of the action plan from the Employee Engagement Survey.
- Data collection and analysis for action: Institutional Strategy and Analysis and the Office for Institutional Equity and Diversity are collaboratively assessing data from the (Student) Campus Climate Survey and the (Employee) Engagement Survey and inviting the university community into discussions on insights and trends.

### Current UNC System Level Initiatives

- The UNC System engaged a Racial Equity Task Force (RETF) to gather and analyze data from constituent institutions through widespread efforts involving surveys and town halls. The RETF report provides robust information and several salient recommendations for action.

The Racial Equity Summit's Steering Team and Guiding Coalition are in place to foster alignment between ongoing commitments, system-level recommendations and Summit-specific next steps.

## **Closing: An Authentic Way Forward**

Change is challenging and requires sustained effort in a complex and evolving environment. Pain, distrust, fear and anger are elements that must be intentionally acknowledged and healed. The path toward healing involves trust-building through responsiveness, transparency, sincerity, consistency and action. To ignite authentic racial equity, NC State must engage in continuous improvement and frequent navigational checks to ensure the university is making progress and appropriately adjusting its course over time. There is much work to be done, and the Racial Equity Summit offered insight into a positive vision by which the university and its constituents may align. With challenge comes opportunities for innovation – a space where NC State excels. To that end, NC State is committed to igniting and sustaining a culture and environment of authentic racial equity.