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# Cultural Equity & Belonging

*Phase 1 Report*

## Dear Members of the NEC community,

**I LAST WROTE IN JUNE**, in response to the many impassioned expressions of pain and concern from students, faculty, and alumni calling on NEC to address our own long-standing inequities. My letter acknowledged our deep-seated need to review and revitalize the NEC educational experience to build a more culturally equitable and inclusive institution. I expressed my gratitude then for the many voices who spoke up, ready to hold NEC accountable as an institution of integrity, heart, and impact, and to participate in the meaningful action that would take place over the months and years ahead. And I committed to systemic change to build an institutional culture that consistently lives up to our shared values—values essential to sustaining and advancing the excellence that has always characterized NEC.

The scope of work is significant, and it requires steady, purposeful action, progress, and accountability. I stand ready to ensure NEC remains consistent with accomplishing the institutional changes needed to advance the sense of belonging, mutual respect, and support experienced within our community. To that end, I share with you now information about our work in progress toward the commitments we made: actions that have been taken, and those that lie directly ahead.

Our first priority, as articulated in June, was to provide the support and resources requested for Black students by the Black Student Union (BSU). Ongoing connection with the BSU is essential as we work towards furthering these goals: developing virtual content recognizing Black culture and music; bolstering financial and administrative support for BSU-led programming; and providing institutional support for economically and socially at-risk Black students.

Long-term success at designing and implementing change of the scope that we have undertaken requires careful and consistent movement toward a vision informed by the lived experience of our students, faculty and staff, and alumni. Listening and genuine, institutional introspection, therefore, were a first order of business, an essential foundational step toward fully understanding the real experience at NEC, anchoring the needs we must address. To that end, Stanford Thompson, appointed in June as Special Advisor to the President, and his colleague Emily Master, completed a summer-long process of seeking out and listening to voices from amongst all our constituencies. Their report, which I have enclosed today, affirms the needs we must address and offers a pathway for the hard work ahead. Drawn from the experiences and needs articulated in more than 140 interviews, Emily and Stanford have identified core issues (“themes”) that should guide the direction of our planning and action, as well as a series of recommendations. While responses to a number of the recommendations are already underway, all the recommendations require consideration and decision-making across a number of NEC departments and constituents, as true and lasting progress will depend on community-wide energy and coordination. Many of the

report’s recommendations involve phased implementation for short-, medium-, and long-term rebuilding.

Both the data that Stanford and Emily gathered about the lived experiences of students, alumni, faculty, and staff, and the relationships they initiated between NEC and diverse participants, are extremely valuable, and both will inform and ground our work ahead.

With this foundational work complete, NEC will move forward during the upcoming semester with key formative efforts; critical among them are action steps to achieve a sustainable support structure for ongoing change:

- > We will establish and launch a CEB Advisory Council. The Council will include individuals from various stakeholder groups across the institution and it will advise, provide feedback, and make recommendations to me in the effort to create a safe learning and working environment in which all voices are valued and every person feels a sense of belonging.
- > Pending the formation of the CEB Advisory Council, a CEB steering committee has been formed to help me name the charge for the new Center for Cultural Equity and Belonging, the structure that will provide the leadership and cross-institution collaboration necessary to implement a number of complex changes. The CEB Steering Committee will also help develop the position description and the profile for the Center’s director, the individual who will lead the Center to secure our consistent, intentional progress over the years to come.

Stanford and Emily will continue to work with us through the hire of a director for the Center for Cultural Equity and Belonging, helping to advance our actions to achieve progress. I’m deeply grateful for their commitment to our community and to this vital work. We will be sharing regular updates about our progress on our website at <https://necmusic.edu/commitment-cultural-equity-belonging>.

I want to thank the greater NEC community for your attention and energy as we address our challenge together. I am confident that as you read the CEB Report you will see clearly how the actions it recommends will advance NEC and empower us to enhance our legacy, to thrive as a culturally equitable, inclusive learning environment, and to take on a leadership role among esteemed conservatories across the country.

Sincerely,



Andrea Kalyn  
President



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# Cultural Equity & Belonging

*Phase 1 Report*

## To NEC Senior Administration:

**THE BLACK STUDENT UNION'S** open letter of June 2, 2020 was a passionate plea for the New England Conservatory community to mourn with its members, understand their struggles, and to take immediate action to build a better institution and future for all its students. The BSU tasked all of us with ensuring that every member of the NEC family — regardless of who they are, where they are from, what they believe, or who they love — feels a sense of belonging.

The outcry from NEC's students, faculty, staff, and alumni that followed stemmed from *feelings* that their voices had not been heard, and the good intentions and actions of the institution over the years had not been felt. Yet, we are confident that accomplishing the recommended goals within this report will improve the culture and environment of the institution.

You do not need to be reminded of how progressive NEC has been since its founding and the myriad of opportunities students have to find their unique musical voices. However, the institution has not consistently offered a listening ear, extended a helping hand, followed through on its commitments, or encouraged students' unique cultural identities to blossom musically and socially.

As NEC works toward strengthening its commitment to cultural equity and belonging, we recommend that the initiatives and practices within be put into action to help the members of the NEC community work together toward a more promising future. Thank you for providing us the opportunity to help NEC begin this process, and we look forward to assisting in the new academic year.

Sincerely,



Stanford Thompson



Emily Liao Master

## Executive Summary

This report is an update regarding cultural equity and belonging efforts at the New England Conservatory (NEC). The most important action undertaken during the summer was supporting the Black Student Union (BSU). We met with the group's leadership and discussed objectives to guide interactions going forward. We are confident that their expectations have been met during this period, and that we have built the trust and collaborative partnership needed for the future.

We engaged in one-on-one conversations with over 140 people from mid-June through mid-September, representing members of NEC's stakeholder groups. We heard an outpouring of support for our Black students and optimism about the steps we will take together to build a better culture at NEC. We thank all those who made the time to participate in dialogue that informed the recommendations outlined in this report.

Through our conversations and meetings, we uncovered the depth and breadth of the challenges that members of the NEC community have faced for far too long. Truth-seeking and listening are essential elements of the healing, reconciliation, and growth that NEC will need to prioritize and act upon consistently. While we recognize that progress on these issues will be difficult, we must seize this moment to rebuild trust, achieve genuine change, and sustain an ideal environment.

Following a final meeting in August, the members of NEC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) Task Force unanimously agreed to reorganize, and become an

advisory group guided by a new charter focused on Cultural Equity and Belonging (CEB). The CEB Advisory Council will consist of elected representatives from stakeholder groups throughout NEC, co-led by President Kalyn and a new Director of CEB. The CEB Advisory Board's volunteer advisors will be widely respected individuals elected by their colleagues to represent particular interests and to work collaboratively across campus on an actionable list of CEB priorities to meet each year.

Members of the NEC community understand that making progress will be a collaborative effort and that it will take time. Together, we will enhance the level of belonging each person in the community feels. As NEC works toward strengthening its commitment to providing a safe environment for learning and working where every person feels valued and can reach their personal and artistic potential, changes will need to be made across the institution to address the challenges of its underrepresented students and to

fulfill the promises to build a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment for all.

In this report, we share recommended next steps toward creating a more open, welcoming, and equitable institution. Our objective is to align words and deeds by suggesting meaningful change through systemic improvement in NEC's priorities, policies, and practices. The list includes new approaches to how staff and faculty are hired, trained, and retained; how students are recruited, supported, and taught; and how the institution is governed and engages with the broader community.

Our list is not exhaustive, but it represents a significant plan for improvement at this time and in the weeks and months ahead. Some actions are immediate and measurable, while others will take longer for people to feel. Still, we are confident in NEC's commitment toward a path of cultural equity and belonging and the ultimate success of these efforts.

# Identified Themes

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Recommended  
Goals

Recommended  
Initiatives for  
2020-2021

## Identified Themes

### TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION

Staff, faculty, and students frequently expressed fear of retaliation or negative consequences if they attempted to seek help, report a problem, or share unwelcome ideas. The institution appeared to many to operate in an unfair, biased, and discriminatory way, thereby breeding mistrust. As the CEB initiatives move forward, the senior administration will need to set clear expectations, communicate widely, and ensure that everyone across the campus understands the desired outcomes. When we share an understanding of where we are heading, what values we are embracing, the standards for improved communication, and when our plans are consistent throughout the institution, there's less room for misunderstanding. When communication lines among team members are open, and communication is honest and encouraged, understanding and common ground are easier to accomplish. When we define expectations for communication, we can develop methods that will uphold standards as well as reduce ambiguity or surprises. With many changes imminent on the horizon, we will need to keep communication lines open, listen to everyone, and make sure to update everyone consistently. This approach will allow people to feel that their time this summer was valued and it will eventually foster trust among stakeholders across the campus as we move forward.

### CULTURAL EQUITY & BELONGING AS A COMMUNITY

Students and alumni frequently connect their sense of community with their "feeling of being cared for, treated in a caring way, valued as an individual and accepted as part of a community on campus." There are dozens of unofficial communities (or cliques) at NEC, and the CEB project has the ability to provide a pathway for many of these communities

to come together powerfully. NEC should continually strive to:

- > Create an open environment through dialogue and frequent communication where free expression is encouraged, respected, and protected;
- > Engage faculty and students in teaching and learning about their cultural background;
- > Provide an active social and learning environment outside of the classroom;
- > Foster positive relationships among ethnic and cultural groups through programs and student activities;
- > Celebrate traditions and heritage of the institution;
- > Assist students when financial, mental, and material needs arise.

NEC is filled with faculty and administrators who care and strive to create the environment described above. However, students struggle to connect with the current community as they navigate many competing priorities daily. Students share responsibility for the problem when they don't show up for what has been created for and by them and by the institution that consistently struggles to create spaces for a constellation of many individuals.

### AWARENESS, ALIGNMENT, ATTENTION, AND ACTION

As the institution focuses its attention on cultural equity and belonging, NEC's senior leadership will need to empower their direct reports to be more conscious of their responsibility to create a culture and environment of CEB. The responsibility for making changes needs to include consequences for failing to meet expectations or not following through promptly with agreed-upon tasks and goals. The NEC community has shared certain experiences of bias, prejudice, and inequality at all levels of the institution that can be addressed quickly and effectively with well-intentioned action.

**TOKENISM** (Diversity without Inclusion)  
NEC has genuinely wanted to improve

diversity, equity, and inclusion within the institution and across the campus. Since there are few People of Color on the board, staff, faculty, and student body, most attempts to include the ideas and voices of People of Color are perceived as tokenism. This happens when they feel their voices are not heard, their identities need to be checked at the door, or they are called upon to represent their cultural community as a whole. Instead of waiting for opportunities to come to increase diversity, NEC should routinely build relationships with prospective students, faculty, staff, and board members to encourage them to apply for or be considered for open positions. Once NEC engages with more diverse populations, they will need to feel that they make significant contributions to the institution and to the experiences of the full community.

### CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Relationship building is fundamental to cultural competence and is based on the foundation of understanding each other's expectations and attitudes while building on the strength of each other's knowledge and experiences. As an institution, NEC needs to demonstrate the will and actions to build understanding between various cultural perspectives, strengthen cultural competency, and work towards equality in opportunity. NEC has a history of respecting diversity and embracing a range of cultures across the campus; however, underlying cultural competence is the principle of trust, respect for diversity, equity, fairness, and social justice. Culture is the fundamental building block of identity. The development of a strong cultural identity is essential to an individual's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong.

### CULTURE OF HIGHER LEARNING

As an institution of higher education, NEC has committed itself to be a place where students learn and grow. The relationship between students and



faculty, especially students' studio instructors, is special—difficult to describe to people unfamiliar with the experience. The faculty play both familial and authoritative roles in NEC students' lives, in most cases positively but in the case of exploitative ones, faculty seem able to negatively affect students' professional aspirations. While faculty and staff may see themselves as open, collaborative, even soliciting feedback and perspective from students, NEC should remain mindful of its role as the primary educator. Students attend the institution to learn; it's not their responsibility to teach the institution. Some students feel that the work they

are being asked to do, especially when it involves teaching about their identity, seems exploitative rather than in the spirit of collaboration or consensus-building.

Students have such strong feelings and high regard for their instructors that they are reluctant—scared, in fact—to report or pursue action in the case of uncomfortable and questionable behavior, actions, and words. Students are keenly aware of faculty impact on their studies and future careers. The culture of idolatry and the invincibility of faculty and “star” teachers make student comfort and belonging all the more difficult to achieve.



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## Recommended Goals

### CREATE A CENTER FOR CULTURAL EQUITY AND BELONGING (CEB)

NEC should strive to foster a community that respects, values, and includes a broad range of backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences that create opportunities for everyone on campus to reach their full potential educationally and professionally. The Center for Cultural Equity and Belonging should lead and support NEC's efforts to advance a diverse and inclusive campus community, consistent with NEC's core values. The Center for CEB will be successful when it motivates and empowers the entire campus and community to see their individual responsibility to contribute to a culture of respect, trust, authenticity, and excellence.

The Center for CEB should exemplify the following operational pillars:

- > **Collaboration:** Everyone is welcomed with dignity and respect, and all voices are engaged.
- > **Camaraderie:** Everyone is cooperative and supportive.
- > **Courage:** Everyone is able to take risks.
- > **Commitment:** Everyone sees things through, and when people engage with the Center for CEB, they know what they are getting and can count on the office to deliver.
- > **Growth:** Everyone seizes each opportunity and challenge to learn, and supports each other in their development towards cultural equity and belonging.

The leadership of the Center for CEB will need to be strategic and visionary, but able to lead from the ground and guide people from their starting places as they begin the CEB journey.

### INCREASE THE DIVERSITY OF OUR COMMUNITY

These recommendations allow NEC to address interpersonal awareness and build a diverse and more inclusive campus culture. Over time that will ensure that underrepresented students, faculty, and staff members thrive in a fair, open, accountable, and supportive environment with more opportunities for personal and professional growth.

- > To clearly frame CEB issues, demonstrate desired behaviors, and change the inequitable norms and structures at NEC: Provide custom anti-racism/implicit bias orientation, encourage inter-group dialogue, and model inclusive pedagogy and bias response for all employees, students, and trustees.
- > After providing a baseline orientation, we recommend considering these alternatives to traditional DEI training rather than relying on the mass-produced diversity training provided by outside "experts":
  - Invest more in expanding the full range of educational opportunities to better understand and disrupt systemic racism through NEC's curriculum and coursework, performances and repertoire, lecture series and discussion panels, student speak-outs, campus-wide teach-ins, exhibitions, and shared readings.
  - Use the extensive knowledge and expertise of NEC's alumni, faculty, staff, and students already have on issues like race, inequality, and diversity.

- Provide private and public spaces for group dialogue that facilitate thought-provoking and meaningful education about the complex problems of prejudice and exclusion, both within the institution and throughout society.

- > Ensure all staff, trustees, and volunteers know the policies and procedures for reporting racist statements or actions and violations of professional conduct. Reminders of the expectations, policies, and reporting procedures are sent at the beginning of each semester. Uphold a safe and non-retaliatory environment.

- > Commit to a program of hiring Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) candidates to staff and faculty, for all open positions including student workers.

- Expand the diversity of the faculty pipeline, and aspire to increase by 50 percent the number of faculty members from underrepresented groups over the next five years. Allow for a broad range of strategies, including thoughtful recruiting efforts to identify diverse candidate pools, encouraging departments to offer new course offerings that might tap diverse talent pools, and allowing increased flexibility to search in advance of future vacancies.

- Prospectively develop relationships with potential BIPOC candidates for employment through networking, special assignments, and campus visits.

- To ensure a diverse slate of final candidates, searches should require the President’s approval of the process, in partnership with Human Resources.
  - Invest in retaining, developing, and advancing BIPOC staff across the institution.
  - Provide specific recruiting guidelines and training for all hiring managers and interview panels designed to heighten unconscious bias awareness, and identify tools for a more effective interview process.
- > Increase the representation of BIPOC individuals on the board of trustees and president’s council
- Strengthen and increase the pipeline of potential BIPOC candidates through networking, alumni relations, and partnerships with local and national BIPOC board development programs.
- > Conduct an external, annual diversity audit to review progress toward annual goals and to establish new objectives. Deliver such a report to the board of trustees and share an executive summary with the NEC community.
- > Review and adjust student recruiting, admissions, and support.
- Build relationships with the leading pre-college DEI programs, including peer programs of Boston BEAM (Chicago Musical Pathways Initiative, Philadelphia Music Alliance for Youth, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Talent Development Program, Nashville Symphony’s Accelerando Program, etc.).
  - Once accepted, connect new admits to BIPOC alumni, current students, and key staff members who can begin welcoming them to the NEC community

- > Strengthen a program of exhibitions, events, and publications that addresses complex and unfamiliar narratives, cross-cultural perspectives and fosters a more diverse and expanded canon of music history.
- Realize diverse future programs and performance offerings in the next three years.
- > Support cross-departmental collaborations and presentations that engage multiple perspectives and divergent views. Make space for alternative, conflicting, and dissenting voices. Foster understanding of connections across cultures, geographically and historically.
- > Commit to intellectual investment by supporting new scholarship and publications about music by Black artists, building their legacy, and re-examining history. Bring the voices of music historians, critics, and other scholars to the interpretation of portrayals of Black subjects and Black culture in all periods of Western music history.

**REVISE COLLABORATION PRACTICES TO ADVANCE GOVERNANCE EFFECTIVENESS**

Without changing NEC’s institutional governance structure, increase the productive exchange of ideas across faculty, staff, and students, the collaboration, and the buy-in for institutional decisions. Currently, the Provost is often the only link between the various NEC members and institutional units. This inhibits effective governance and accountability for the functions and processes that promote CEB.

**REVIEW AND ADJUST DECISION-MAKING PATTERNS THAT IMPEDE DIVERSITY**

Hierarchical structures within the DEI Task Force, student leadership, faculty, and staff run counter to democratic values and they also impede NEC’s efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive campus. If those who are directly affected by the institution’s actions are not included in key

decision-making processes, they will use their advocacy to oppose the institution, demand compensation for their volunteer time, or redirect their financial resources elsewhere. Most importantly, NEC will continue to arrive at conclusions, decisions, and strategies that are incongruent with its desire to foster a community of cultural equity and belonging.

- > Dissolve the current DEI Task Force and launch a comprehensive process to pilot a new CEB Advisory Council.
- > Develop a comprehensive understanding of purpose, mission, and goals that are amplified through a new “CEB Statement” developed by various community members.
- > Create two-way communication between members of the NEC community and CEB Advisory Council to exchange ideas through discussion, exploration, and ideation.
- > Restructure the Student Leadership Council and Student Senate to become more inclusive and representative of NEC’s diverse student population.
- Improve the communication and collaboration between NEC’s various student organizations and student body to increase buy-in, transparency, and trust.
  - Clarify standards of student involvement in CEB (compensation, advisory role, and what to expect from the institution).
- > Clarify the expectations that leadership will follow up with members of the NEC community and follow through on all confirmed commitments.



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Recommended Initiatives for 2020-2021

> Stay connected with the Black Student Union (BSU)

- Continue to provide support for the BSU to communicate and collaborate with Black alumni for their 2020-2021 virtual programming. Partner with them on select events of mutual benefit.
- Hire a full-time BIPOC psychotherapist to address the mental health needs brought forward by the BSU while providing outreach, consultation, and training to the full NEC community on mental health and wellness issues specific to diverse and underrepresented student populations, including Black/ African-American, Asian/ Asian-American, and Latinx/ Hispanic populations.
  - Regularly follow up on their emotional and mental wellness needs to confirm they are aware of the resources NEC is providing and encourage them to seek out support.
- Launch a collaborative process with the BSU for a multi-day/ week Black History Month / Coretta Scott King festival in February 2021 that includes inter-departmental involvement, local community partnerships, and a national reach.

> Launch the Cultural Equity and Belonging Advisory Council

- Use online applications, voting, elections, and complete the first meeting in the Spring semester.
- Review the Disruptive Equity Education Project’s proposal to determine what services to engage throughout the academic year.

- Launch a subcommittee that would work closely with HR and the Senior Leadership Team to develop a job profile and lead the search for a Director for CEB.
- Launch a subcommittee that would advise on the design of the Center for CEB.
  - Update the institution’s DEI statement through the lens of CEB.
  - Determine which departments should partner with the Center for CEB.
  - Determine which staff should have CEB responsibilities in their job profiles.

> Restructure the Student Leadership Council and Student Senate

- Finalize draft constitution for new student representative body.
- Present to the student body.
- Hold election for new student representatives.

> Collaborate with the College, Preparatory School, and Continuing Education to review NEC’s curriculum, courses, and supplemental educational activities and bring them into alignment with culturally responsive standards

- Led by faculty, launch a process for their peers to provide feedback and share ideas about the curriculum and process.
- Approve and fund workshops that closely align with NEC’s CEB goals.

- Encourage the immediate implementation of CEB-related curriculum adjustments and frequently share those activities with the NEC community
  - Convene leaders of the curriculum committees to share initial feedback and ideas.
  - Conduct a formal audit in partnership with the curriculum committees and senior leadership for changes to be implemented beginning in the 2021-2022 academic year.

> Unify the various alumni groups under NEC’s new Alumni Association

- Involve members of the Progressive Alumni Coalition (PAC) in CEB initiatives and activities.
  - Encourage them to participate in, and contribute to, the NEC Perspectives Forum.
  - Encourage their participation in nominating underrepresented alumni as prospective board members.
  - Encourage them to include representatives on various CEB committees and initiatives across the campus.

> Review and adjust, as needed, key institutional systems and processes aimed at improving cultural equity and belonging at NEC

- Improve DEI-related data collection by building baseline measurements about recruitment, applications/ nominations, acceptance, and matriculation.



- Improve HR systems that create greater trust, clarity, and transparency in reporting Title IX and racial/cultural-related problems, concerns, and incidents.
- Improve and consistently implement staff, faculty, guest artist, and lecturer recruiting, inviting, hiring, and contracting processes.
- > Continue the NEC Perspectives Forum and expand the topics of discussions beyond the experiences of Black members of the NEC community
  - Accept nominations for topics, leaders, and speakers for regular sessions throughout the year.
- > Develop a national and international profile as a leader in the field
  - Highlight and leverage NEC's leadership of Boston BEAM by providing additional resources to its students, convene peer programs, and consistently communicate program success to the NEC community and throughout the field.
- Convene peer institutions to share their experiences and best practices from their DEI work.
- Partner with reputable national and international organizations aligned with NEC's CEB goals which can implement projects that provide opportunities for NEC's underrepresented students, alumni, and faculty.
- > Align community initiatives with CEB goals
  - Review NEC's current community initiatives and programs with leaders across the campus to suggest ways to increase NEC's impact throughout the broader community.