



NATIONAL COLLEGIATE CHORAL ORGANIZATION

Monday, September 28, 2020

From the President: A Summit Reflection

Stories are powerful.

On the 13th of August 2020, we heard and witnessed the stories—the personal experiences, the personal narratives—of our choral colleagues, as the National Collegiate Choral Organization convened an unprecedented summit on anti-racism for our national and executive boards.

Led by the Washington Consulting Group and the Rev. Dr. Jamie Washington, we engaged in deep conversation, open and honest sharing, and continuous examination of our own privilege and oppression as we confronted the task of becoming a more inclusive and anti-racist organization. We established shared definitions for words like *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion*, *individual racism*, and *systemic racism*, so that we could build a better understanding of how we had witnessed or experienced racism in our work as choral professionals and collegiate educators.

Our personal experiences were front and center. Stories of marginalization and exclusion. Stories of dealing with issues of racism only during times of crisis. Stories of private, personal understandings. Stories of fear around the tenure process. Stories of how non-white voices only matter at certain times and not at all times. Stories of always feeling asked or compelled to represent our identity in our work or our art. Stories of exploitation and of sacrifice. Stories of academic burdens borne more often by cis-women, people of color, and our LGBTQIA+ colleagues; for many, these burdens are often experienced through their intersectional identities.

We also heard stories of recruitment and retention. Stories of mentorship and support. Stories of growing self-awareness and interrogation of biases. Stories of “waking up” if not yet “fully woke.” Stories of letting go of the need for perfection, and embracing the inevitability of mistakes and missteps. Stories of centering our values and their relevance in our work.

As I have reflected on our summit these past few weeks, it is clear that our work together was necessary, impactful, and long overdue. And while it is only the beginning of a much longer journey, the stories we shared that day will be the compass as we chart the course ahead.

I want you to hear some of the stories and reflections shared by our board members, but first...

Gratitude

I join with my Executive Board colleagues—Elizabeth Swanson, Miguel Ángel Felipe, Marie Bucoy-Calavan, Matthew Ferrell, and Mark Nabholz—in expressing my sincere thanks and appreciation to the 40 National Board Members who attended our summit (listed in no particular order):

From the Central Region

Nicole Aldrich, Marques L. A. Garrett, Brian Schmidt, Andy Morgan, Elise Hepworth, Mariana Farah, Tracey Gregg-Boothby, Nicholas Cummins

From the Eastern Region

Caron Daley, Marguerite Brooks, Tim Reno, Brandon Williams, Helena von Rueden, Daniel McDavitt, Jeffrey Douma, Nicolas Dosman, Rollo Dilworth

From the Midwestern Region

Erin Colwitz, Michael McGaghie, Eduardo Garcia-Novelli, Richard Schnipke, Gabriela Hristova, Cheryl Frazes Hill, Steven Hankle, Merrin Guice Gill, Lee Nelson

From the Southern Region

Jennifer Sengin, Alicia Walker, Gary Packwood, Ianthe Marini, Jason Max Ferdinand, William Powell

From the Western Region

Shawna Stewart, Timothy Westerhaus, Kellori Dower, Jace Saplan, Alec Schumacker, Jeffrey Benson, Katherine FitzGibbon, Reed Criddle.

We are also deeply grateful to eight of our board members in particular who served as key stakeholders as we planned for our summit in early meetings with Dr. Washington: Rollo Dilworth, Kellori Dower, Jason Max Ferdinand, Marques L. A. Garrett, Merrin Guice Gill, Gary Packwood, Jace Saplan, and Helena von Reuden. Thank you.

And we thank Rev. Dr. Washington and his team for an engaging session; you can view [the slides from our summit here](#).

What We Heard

In order to create a space for open and honest conversation, we asked NCCO's past secretary, Brian Gorelick, to transcribe the minutes of our summit in lieu of an audio or video recording. We did this to respect the privacy of our board members and to create as safe a space as possible for these personal life experiences to be witnessed. We invite you to [read the minutes](#) for a broad overview of our gathering.

In addition, sixteen of our national board members shared some powerful responses to post-summit survey questions compiled by Vice President, Elizabeth Swanson. Their words resonate deeply, and I've listed an abundant selection of them here to invite you into the intimacy and power of our time together. They are the seeds of our future planning.

Please share your personal reactions, feelings, thoughts, and ideas that have arisen since our Aug. 13 summit and webinar.

I was in awe of the bravery of our colleagues of color who shared their stories, and glad that the response from everyone else was just to listen, not to defend or minimize.

Being able to be open and honest with non-people of color colleagues was refreshing, informative, and challenging all at the same time, but again needed and must continue.

[I am] encouraged by the majority participation from the organization. Many colleagues did not realize the plight of their minoritized colleagues.

I am more than willing to enact change in my spheres, but I crave more practical tools and language to do this.

I am inspired to continue this work in my ensembles and to challenge myself to be more informed and educated on matters pertaining to race and diversity in our profession.

Through your observations and experiences, please list ways in which NCCO has colluded or been complicit with racism.

We have been complicit in our ties to a symbolically racist tenure process. We have created repertoire standards based on a Euro-centric model, and curated a membership that upholds that model.

I think we each need to reflect on how we have been complicit with racism, and this includes institutions. The fact that NCCO is asking the question is the point.

The Eurocentric/White tone and approach are still considered the standard for American choirs. Our HBCU colleagues who have so much more on their plates where most do not have the opportunity for research/creative activity need our partnership and concerted efforts to include them and the rich history that HBCU choirs have to offer.

Inclusivity — How will we know if we are successfully embodying and valuing this principle as an organization? What will this look like and how does this feel?

We will have accessibility and equity included in our decision making process as well as our policies. Including membership dues, conference fees, performance invitations, session topics, articles, compositions and publications. It will celebrate the everyday work of our colleagues. It will feel less elitist.

I think it's about really doing the numbers, as NCCO has been doing. How many women, people of color, differently-able people are we presenting? On the flipside, it's about making people feel like belonging to NCCO is for them. Why join? But first, it's about representation. People need to see themselves in the organization.

I think our conferences are the gateway and tool for us to continue to learn about and model inclusivity within the American choral profession.

One theme that seemed to be recurring on Thursday centered around the Euro-centric, traditional "conservatory" training of most choral conductors working in colleges and universities. I think a major step toward inclusion is for NCCO to continue to provide resources and education to help its membership broaden our musical perspectives and knowledge base.

It should feel organic...eventually. However, now, it should be deliberate - just as many agencies have been deliberate in denying services to BIPOC, NCCO should be deliberate in including BIPOC individuals.

To you, what does it mean and what does it look like to "be of service" to one another and to our profession, as opposed to "saving" or "fixing"?

To be of service is to bring together those with viewpoints outside the mainstream and to have a conversation (like we did) that says "maybe we really ought to do this," as opposed to trying to "save" those outside the Eurocentric model.

Being of service is being responsive, being aware of and working with others and not simply being the answer. It is a form of shared governance--adaptive leadership as it were.

This is an attitude. We choral directors are programmed to "fix". We fix sounds, we fix errors in the score, etc. We have a sort of notion that the work we do is "transformational" (and it can be!), but this can preclude our ability to listen to others, to invite collaboration, and to hear from our communities. So, I think it's just that: we need to learn new ways of doing the work. Our field, like many other fields, is in a time of deep transition.

If we come to this work with humility and open-mindedness, bringing our genuine, honest selves, and with the willingness to openly accept the truth of other's experiences, the outcomes will be more honest, rich, and powerful.

To be of service means being available; being a listening and acting ally.

Being of service to our profession to me means helping our membership gain tools and knowledge to be confident in their own ability to sensitively and appropriately do repertoire they are not familiar with.

First, we must listen. Second, we must be vigilant about intentionality.

What we must do is ask people of color what they need from us. We must listen. And then we must do our damndest to make it happen.

What are your concerns or fears (if any) about our work together?

My only concern is for our ongoing momentum. Please don't let it end here! Even when we think we're there, the work must continue. This has been a wonderful beginning.

One concern I have is reducing the quality expectations we have in our profession. I think there is a way for us to continue striving for excellence and raising the bar of performance expectations (without being exclusive or elitist) and also broaden our scope beyond the 20th century, Euro- and Anglo-centric focus we inherited. In my opinion, NCCO is the organization focused on quality. I hope that we can retain that and embrace that as we also model and normalize diversity, inclusion, and expanding our choral profession.

I liked that Dr. Washington was encouraging of everyone being open and honest without judgment against those who might be in a different place on the path. This can be so exhausting for BIPOC members to hear though, again and again having to hear that others are pretty far back down the path. So I worry about BIPOC leaders being exhausted as well.

I suppose I'm concerned that we won't take advantage of this moment, or that we'll allow naysayers to convince us that it will destroy the "integrity" of the organization to make these changes. I'm afraid we'll take a middle road so that we don't seem too "political" to some of our members.

I'm not concerned. This is ONE BIG hive mind! I'm excited about the possibilities.

What are your thoughts about establishing, together, a set of principles to which we each can aspire when we gather? (Do you have other ideas for how we might be intentional about establishing and remembering to prioritize our values as a community?)

I think we can start with those words of equity and accessibility. Let those guide us as we start to comb through what we already have.

We need these types of guiding principles. They are not just another document. They feed our work and become generative.

A set of principles or core values, adopted by the organization, will help to guide future members and leadership to continue the work that has been started.

Yes, make anti-racism a part of the mission statement and assess annually. This is the only way it will become culture, I believe. Couple that with the inclusion of many voices and workshops dedicated to the entire span of choral music (culturally diverse, small colleges, disenfranchised communities), and there is hope for a better NCCO with regard to IDEA.

Yes, principles are essential to creating a strong foundation in our organization! It should be the pillar when making all decisions and how we treat and support one another.

Additional thoughts. Where can we go from here?

It is my hope that we can learn to integrate this good work as we program music for our ensembles. It is also my hope that we can continue to dialogue in order to build a greater understanding of how we can do the work in our ensembles that can help to build greater communities when our students leave our class and into their own communities. Our work invites community. We need to continue the dialogue that guides us to do this effectively.

I am particularly interested in broadening the view of the choral canon. This is something for which I would be happy to serve as a committee member, if it becomes a valued initiative. I think it is important that we retain the value of the traditional canon, but also recognize that the canon we inherited is not the "pie," but rather a piece of the pie as we move forward. [...] If we mindfully cultivate resources through thoughtful discussion and work to create audio/video resources as support—I believe we can help broaden our perspectives, and the perspectives of those who will lead choral music in the future.

As an educator, I have always desired to be inclusive and to program varied and diverse repertoire. However, over the past several years, I have been realizing that I lack the knowledge and skills to be truly inclusive and to promote anti-racism in both my interactions with my

students and in my repertoire choices. I feel the conversations that took place on Thursday were an incredible first step for NCCO as an organization and for me, personally.

Keep moving forward. Don't become distracted by the inevitable nay-sayers. If the executive board believes this work to be important, then find a way to make it a permanent conversation until the need no longer exists.

I was deeply encouraged by the frankness of the conversation at the summit. I think we've got an opportunity here to reshape the choral world. As college educators, we work with future conductors and teachers. The values we embody will trickle down into K-12 and out into the community. We can make a big change in the choral world in just a generation or two. I hope we will do it.

Toward A Set of Guiding Principles

The largest and most difficult question of all looms before us:

What comes next?

It seems clear that we need to articulate a set of guiding principles for our National Collegiate Choral Organization. Out of the stories and reflections from our summit, five questions are beginning to emerge about where we should focus our energies:

- How do we **build a community of welcome**, where members feel safe to bring their full selves to the table?
- How do we **ensure access** to NCCO for all collegiate choral educators?
- How do we **place intentional inclusivity** at the center of our work, especially in the areas of repertoire, research, pedagogy, and programming?
- How do we **establish a culture of respect** for diverse perspectives?
- How do we **define excellence** to be deliberately anti-racist?

This is work that we should do not just at the national or executive board levels, but at the grassroots level of our membership as well.

In the coming months, we will ask you for your thoughts on these questions as we work to define our guiding principles.

We need your input.

Where should we focus our energies?

How can we use these principles to shape new policies,

...build new programs, and

...offer new resources for you and your work?

What are we missing?

You are vital to this work. We serve you, our members, and we can't do it without you.

Onward

I am grateful to my friends who shared their personal experiences of struggle, exclusion, pain, discrimination, and burden. And I am grateful to the same friends who shared experiences of hope, resilience, courage, devotion, and loyalty. I could have never known your experiences otherwise. Thank you so much.

I am empowered by your stories. I am frustrated by the shared themes of racism in so many of your stories. And I am fired up and ready to imagine new stories—for this organization, for the profession we love, and for our students and our future choral leaders.

I am humbled by this beginning you have made possible, but it is only a beginning.

Let's get to work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. DiOrio', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dominick DiOrio, President

With the NCCO Executive Board

Miguel Ángel Felipe, *President-Elect*

Elizabeth Swanson, *Vice President*

Marie Bucoy-Calavan, *Secretary*

Matthew Ferrell, *Treasurer*

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