Broadening participation during VCR VIII

In VCR VIII, we will continue and expand our VCR VII DEI strategy of ensuring that VCR is an exceptional place for varied scientists to work and study while we do the slower work of building a more diverse team. As recommended in midterm review, SMART-formatted goals guide our priorities and progress. Our DEI plan is updated annually within a planning framework to identify details such as outcomes, resources, and coordinators for annual actions on each goal. In VCR VIII, we will establish an annual co-work session between the DEI committee and Executive Committee to animate solutions.

1: To build an institutional climate that values diversity and inclusion

1.1 - VCR will regularly support trainings, including bystander intervention, mental health first aid, and mentorship. The project will pay for externally-facilitated trainings for upper level personnel at least biennially. We have developed a cascading facilitation model to train internal facilitators for annual student training. Effective training should result in higher participation in training and more inclusive experiences reported in biannual workplace climate surveys. 1.2 - We will share a reading list with all new personnel that facilitates cultural awareness of the Eastern Shore and VCR regional context. Outcomes include increased equity in awareness of project context and increased interest in and respect for regional knowledge and people demonstrated through engagement. 1.3 - We will facilitate interactions that center and celebrate diverse identities within VCR and our regional community, including at least one cultural potluck each research season. We will continue efforts to adapt meeting and field schedule expectations to accommodate non-traditional participation, such family caregiving roles. Metrics of success include increased inclusion and sense of community reported in mid-summer and biannual workplace climate surveys. 1.4 - We will introduce nominations for an annual accolade to highlight someone who has made exemplary contributions to inclusion at VCR. The award will accentuate our values while helping others learn from leaders in this work, increasing the use of inclusive practices across lab groups.

2: To promote diversity of personnel across all ranks, we are diversifying the networks from which VCR personnel informally recruit while we work to increase the use of structured processes that will promote higher diversity in candidate pools.

2.1 - We will help diversify the networks from which the VCR recruits participants by [2.1.1] Inviting two speakers per year to our virtual seminar series highlighting coastally relevant research at the intersection of exemplary inclusion work or conducted by researchers underrepresented in the field. Robust and increasing seminar attendance and emergence of subsequent interactions and research collaborations with speakers will be metrics of success. We piloted this program for 1 year with success. [2.1.2] Hosting coastal methods and issues workshops for early career researchers, with additional support for those traditionally underrepresented in science. This approach shares VCR expertise while building connections, trust, and interest with a more diverse network of potential PIs. We will offer two (2) workshops during VCR VIII, aiming to engage 18 individuals across the series, with ⅓ of spaces (at least three per workshop) reserved for those who identify as underrepresented in coastal sciences and ecology or who share similar context warranting sponsored attendance.
[2.1.3] When promising collaborators or workshop participants who would contribute to a more diverse VCR are identified, ROA supplements and affiliate researcher agreements will be leveraged as intermediate steps to support their developing research programs while working more deeply with VCR, such as conducting pilot studies that could contribute to VCR research. We aim to share targeted opportunities for continuing collaboration with at least one attendee of each workshop. [2.1.4] In Year 1 and 2 of VCR VIII, we will create inclusive advertising materials to convey LTER as an asset in grad student/post-doc recruiting and will share materials for use by individual PIs (hiring at their discretion). Building from successes with REU recruitment, we will 1) share a recommended list of practices and avenues for advertising student and research opportunities; for PIs who have engaged in professional development around mentoring, 2) provide promoted postings through institutional or programmatic memberships to minority-serving societies and platforms to enhance distribution and application rates. We will request summary overviews of top candidates and incoming students to assess influences on cohort diversity derived from these supports.

2.2 - We will increase transparency and formalize our processes for selection of students and PIs to align with our vision for inclusive participation by publishing our policies and implementing selection rubrics by Year 3 to help us minimize implicit bias when making selections and allocating resources. [2.2.1] Annually increase the representational diversity of REU student participants until they, on average, reflect the US population by advertising opportunities to HBCUs, minority-serving clubs and professional societies, and community colleges; continuing use of selection rubrics; setting expectations for participation by LTER mentors; and providing mentorship support. Use surveys to track intersectional metrics of diversity over time for REUs and participating mentors. [2.2.2] Existing processes for recruiting and selecting project participants, including PIs, affiliated researchers, and students will be shared on our intranet website by Year 2 of VCR VIII. The DEI committee will work with project leadership to determine how structured selection processes, such as rubrics, can increase equity in our processes for upper levels of personnel, for supplements and discretionary support during VCR VIII, with the aim of formalizing all participation processes during this funding cycle.

2.3 - Support retention and inclusion through [2.3.1] Peer mentorship across institutions. Due to UVA being the home institution a team of UVA graduate students will welcome and mentor new non-UVA students and young professionals. Upon initiation of VCR VIII, each PI who has served ≤ 2 grant cycles will be paired with a veteran PI mentor. Biennially, ASM will include a closed door Q&A session among PIs to help raise and address uncertainties and needs for support, especially from newer PIs. All mentorship efforts should increase retention, resource use, and positive responses around mentorship and community of practice on biannual climate surveys.

3: To develop local and community partnerships that increase diversity-related research and program initiatives

3.1 - Provide paid research experiences for ESCC students that meet capstone requirements while connecting students with LTER science and 4-year college mentors. We will support 2 interns per year, with potential to build up to 4 by the end of VCR VIII. We will also launch an annual experiential science day via ESCC’s Project Horizons – a college-track mentoring program for at-risk middle and high school students in Accomack and Northampton
Counties. Project Horizons exposes students to post-secondary environments while supporting their academic progress. Our science day, modeled after successful programs at other colleges, will immerse them in realistic experiences of academic research while expanding their exposure to scientists. Students who successfully complete the program are eligible for free ESCC attendance and will be prioritized mentees in our capstone collaboration. We'll further strengthen meaningful connections between our programs by including ESCC science faculty and student interns in our ASM.

3.2 - VCR researchers will participate in career day events and connect with the College Advising Corps to make informal science role models more accessible and to better support scientific career paths for students in CAC-supported high schools. VCR scientists will meet with CAC advisers annually to offer our knowledge and personnel in support of their advising. Our engagements will be adapted based on adviser feedback. 3.3 - Work with organizers from Native tribes, including established connections with the Nottoway Indian Tribe of Virginia, to support Indigenous access to coastal wilderness by bringing their ‘healing paddles’ approach to the VCR study area. Twice a year, VCR will sponsor boating access, provide equipment, and lead field safety, while listening to Indigenous experiences and allowing tribal members to lead the experience on the water. Space will be held for VCR participants to reflect on how these experiences shape their understanding of the Virginia coast and their research findings there. Native participants can delegate a presenter to participate in our ASM annually. We expect this partnership to increase VCR participant awareness of regional Indigenous peoples and ways of thinking while increasing Indigenous participants’ sense of place and connection to the coastal wilderness, as reflected in brief surveys or interviews.