inclusity   **Hancock County Interview and Focus Group Summary**

Inclusity conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with a variety of members of the Hancock County community, including (but not limited to) young professionals, members of the clergy, the school superintendent, high school students, the mayor, and community leaders. Through this process, we gained a solid understanding of the existing county climate, including barriers and opportunities that are relevant to the county's efforts to become more welcoming and inclusive.

In this document, we will first summarize some of the most common ideas and themes that came up across the topics we covered in these interviews and focus groups: the existing community culture, the potential benefits of inclusion, and the role of leadership in becoming more inclusive. Then, we will provide some recommendations for actions Hancock County may consider taking to become more inclusive. We have tried to include many actions of varying scope (from quick wins to systematic, long-term changes) and that can be undertaken by different individuals (from community leaders to individual community members). Together, the document should provide a comprehensive picture of where the county is now and how to move forward to promote inclusion and make the county more welcoming for all.

Central Themes of Interviews and Focus Groups
Existing community culture
- What are Hancock County's greatest strengths?
    - In general, the people we spoke to had a positive impression of the existing culture, describing it as a tight-knit, safe community.
    - Many people mentioned a focus on tradition in the community.
    - There was a general sense that the community is moving in the right direction: people noted having great leadership, improving support for people with mental health challenges, and open-mindedness (except around a couple sensitive issues, like abortion and the police).
- What are Hancock County's greatest weaknesses?
    - One idea that many people expressed was that the greatest strengths *are* the greatest weaknesses. The emphasis on tradition and the existing tight-knit community can make it difficult for different kinds of people to feel welcome and included in the community.
    - Many people described the community as being resistant to change and a place where stereotypes are common and often tolerated (e.g., believing that schools with higher proportions of minority students are "bad schools").
    - Furthermore, people described a lack of accountability for individuals who engage in harassment / discrimination. Not intervening amounts to passive agreement.
    - There were a few points made related to community leadership, including that there is a lack of diversity among community leaders and that Findlay City Council meetings only occur during the day, preventing those with 9-5 jobs from attending.
    - A great number of individuals mentioned issues around socioeconomic status, including segregation by social class.
    - When thinking about diversity specifically, people noted that it's thought of as a "liberal" idea and it's assumed that it could diminish the community in some way (which fits with the emphasis on tradition in the community).
- What personal qualities could cause individuals in this community to feel excluded?
    - The general sentiment was that the community is only truly inclusive for white, Republican, Christian, older, heterosexual, middle/upper class individuals. People of Color, young people, LGBTQ+, and lower social class individuals were most often brought up as groups that are "out of the norm" in the community.
    - Some people brought up how things have gotten slightly worse recently because of the community response to those "out of the norm" groups. For example, reactions to Black Lives Matter protests and pride events have sent signals to those individuals that they are not welcome in the community.
    - A few people also brought up other unwelcoming signals, like people driving around town displaying Confederate flags.

Existing community culture continued

- <u>What are the most significant issues / challenges facing Findlay and the surrounding areas?</u>
  - People expressed both immediate and long-term concerns.
  - Immediate concerns often focused on the well-being of individuals who are already in the community.
  - Youth in particular identified pressing challenges regarding how people from different social groups are treated: some expressed feeling personally unsafe in the community and shared experiences of being threatened.
  - Many people mentioned that this is a community where it's difficult to be out of the norm.
  - In the longer term, people expressed fear that the lack of inclusion will have an adverse effect on the community. They worry that Whirlpool, Marathon, and Cooper Tire will choose to relocate due to an inability to bring diverse talent to Findlay.
  - They also noted that the community is not making itself attractive to younger people, single people, and people lower in socioeconomic status, which is likely to greatly inhibit the area's ability to grow in the future.
  - Many people mentioned housing specifically and explained the lack of affordable housing in the community, particularly for single individuals or people without families.
- <u>What kinds of things happen in the community to make people feel *included*?</u>
  - A few people said that the mayor herself makes people feel more included.
  - A few of the other things mentioned that make people feel included are the pride picnic, events held for people with particular interests (e.g., gardening), DORA events, and the art community.
- <u>Do you believe that Hancock County is a place that welcomes diversity? Why / why not?</u>
  - Almost without exception, people answered "no" to this question.
  - When explaining why the community is not welcoming to diversity, people cited a fear of change, an emphasis on homogeneity in the community, and "1950s-era discrimination."
  - Furthermore, there is a lot of resistance to change in the community when it comes to diversity. One example people gave was the city council's attempts to cancel LGBTQ+ pride.
  - There were a few examples of groups or individuals that had gained some acceptance in the community, but all shared two characteristics: being relatively high income and having an advocate/ally from the "in the norm" group.
- <u>What is the community's perception of diversity and inclusion?</u>
  - Connected to the responses given above, the large majority of responses to this question broadly fit into the categories "people don't care" or "actively negative."
  - Some people explained that they know individuals who view increasing diversity as a threat (e.g., worrying that someone else will take their children's place).
- <u>Imagine a more inclusive Hancock County. What differences exist between your vision and the current culture?</u>
  - The people we talked to have many interesting ideas. We will list some with little/no commentary.
  - More public, neutral space for group gatherings and community events.
  - More affordable housing and housing attractive for single people.
  - Improved transportation services and infrastructure.
  - More contact between people who are different from each other.

Summary: The people we talked to in general have a deep appreciation and love for this community. However, they expressed many concerns and fears about the community's ability to meet this new challenge and embrace diversity and inclusion. They generally felt as though there is outright animosity toward both the concept of diversity and individuals who are out of the norm, but also feared that the failure to embrace diversity and inclusion will directly cause the community to shrivel. There was also a general sense that these changes need to be presented in a less threatening way. There were numerous ideas about how to make Hancock County more inclusive.

Potential benefits of inclusion
- Distinguishing diversity and inclusion
  - The people we talked to understand the distinction between diversity and inclusion and noted that inclusion is really what the community needs.
  - A potential benefit of emphasizing inclusion is avoiding the reactance that accompanies the term "diversity" in this community.
- What are the benefits of implementing an Inclusion and Diversity initiative for this community?
  - Many individuals explicitly made a business case, noting again their fear that the county's largest employers will choose to leave if they are unable to recruit diverse talent.
  - For their part, people working in those business expressed a desperate need for more diversity, and indeed noted that they could be forced to leave the community if they could not get a diverse talent pool to move to Findlay.
  - A couple people expressed fatigue with the business case (mostly wanting people to be inclusive because it's the right thing to do) but conceded that the business case may be more motivating for people who don't otherwise care.
  - Relatedly, one benefit identified by numerous people was that such an initiative would increase the chances that the community will be able to thrive in the long term, including helping the city (and county generally) to grow.
  - A more personal benefit some people mentioned was wanting their friends to feel welcome in the community, especially but not exclusively those individuals who belong to out of the norm groups.

Summary: Here again we saw people express the concern that failing to become more inclusive will have an adverse effect on the community. The "business case," which describes diversity and inclusion as a competitive advantage, is thus central when they think about benefits of this work. However, the personal explanation of wanting their friends to feel welcome in the community is also notable.

Role of leadership
- Who is primarily responsible for making the community more diverse and inclusive?
  - This question yielded some interesting responses, particularly from individuals who have some kind of leadership role in the community. Some individuals suggested that it was others who were primarily responsible, while others accepted that they were responsible themselves.
  - Regardless of how they answered, there was a common theme of powerlessness among even those individuals with a leadership role in the community. Those who suggested others were primarily responsible often expressed that opinion because they did not feel that they personally had the power to do anything. Those who said they were responsible themselves generally explained that they wanted to do more but weren't really sure what *to* do.
- How would community residents describe how Senior Leaders have supported inclusion and diversity?
  - Answers to this question unsurprisingly varied significantly based on which leaders were being considered.
  - The city council of Findlay was singled out for not being very forward-thinking on these issues, which is likely due to them being overwhelmingly (or exclusively) older, white men.
  - On the flipside, the mayor was described as having a positive influence in this area, helping people from different backgrounds feel welcome and making some strides to make the community in general more inclusive.
- How could you improve as inclusive leaders?
  - The people we spoke to express a willingness to create safe spaces for diversity and give up power and control. They also noted an openness to change leadership criteria.
  - Some individuals, and many of the youth, wanted there to be more responsibility and voice for younger people in the community.
  - Another common theme was wanting to see more role modeling and "walking the talk" in the community, which some leaders said they needed more courage to be able to do.
  - Others shared that they could be more intentional around inclusion efforts and creating safe spaces.

Role of leadership continued

Summary: Most community leaders we talked want to play a bigger role in making the community more inclusive, but how involved leaders want to be varies significantly based on which leader is being considered: some seem to be leading from the front on this issue while others lag behind. Even those who wanted to be involved, though, often felt as though they lack the power, knowledge, action steps, and courage they needed to be successful inclusive leaders.

Other thoughts on data

In our interviews and focus groups, we heard a lot about "older, white, conservative men" as a group. However, we did not hear from many people who fit this description directly. It would be useful for the county to have a better understanding of how individuals who belong to this group think about these issues, including salient barriers for them as well as opportunities for change.

Sometimes we think about out I&D work as a staircase, where those who are most well-versed in issues related to social justice, bias, prejudice, oppression, etc. are higher on the staircase. Where a group fits on this staircase has important implications for the recommendations we make for that group. Based on the people we talked to, Hancock County as a community is at one of the lower steps on this staircase. People who are at this point of the staircase are unlikely to be moved by academic discussions (e.g., explaining institutional oppression), but are much more likely to be moved by personal experiences and the perspectives of people who they know and trust. You'll notice that this recognition is present in many of our recommendations, and it will serve as a useful lens when creating a strategic plan for fostering diversity and inclusion in Hancock County.

Recommended Action

As mentioned above, we are deliberately being very inclusive (no pun intended) with this list: we're aiming to include actions that vary both in their difficulty and in who would be responsible for implementing them. This section is structured around community needs identified through our data gathering.

Need: More accessibility, including neutral meeting places and access to downtown or other areas of the city.
The concept of accessibility came up in numerous forms, from more straightforward (e.g., having neutral meeting places) to more complex (e.g., making the community accessible for lower-income individuals). The simplicity / difficult of the associated actions varies accordingly.

Actions:
- Publicize existing community meeting spaces and make reserving these spaces easier (e.g., by implementing an online system). Ask existing groups in the community that normally meet elsewhere to hold a meeting in these spaces to help publicize them.
- Explore the possibility of adding new community meeting spaces, such as pavilions or small meeting centers in public parks.
- Change City Council meeting times to not occur during the workday. This will also increase the likelihood that individuals with full-time (or even part-time) jobs can sit on council.
- Explore options for increasing accessibility to downtown (e.g., transit systems, bike lanes or paths, improved sidewalks). Some small communities have bus limited bus lines that operate on a limited schedule (e.g., Northfield, MN).
- Create a housing page that compiles local real estate and rental listings that is easily accessible from the city website, assisting individuals who may be thinking about relocating to the area.
- Explore options for attracting developers of affordable housing to the area. May consider working in junction with Marathon, Whirlpool, Cooper Tire, or the University, since all are likely to have lower-income individuals.

Need: Make concept of diversity less threatening to community members. (they're already here kind of campaign, sharing our culture kind of campaign)
A common theme in our data was that members of this community are resistant to change and many bristle when they hear the term "diversity." This has the potential to undermine the rest of the actions Hancock County takes, and thus must be addressed directly.

Behavioral scientists refer to the resistance people expressed as "symbolic threat," or a belief that values and beliefs (as opposed to tangible goods) may be at risk. The most direct way to assuage symbolic threats is to reassure people that their beliefs and values are not at risk. One way this can be done is by showing that the community has already gotten more diverse without things changing radically. Accomplishing this is a little complicated in this domain, since in a way it amounts to telling white people, "Don't worry, you'll still be in the dominant position." The logic, though, is that you need to get the most resistant people to at least come to the table for you to have any opportunity to change their attitudes.

Actions:
- Create a media campaign featuring stories of pillars of the community from marginalized (and non-marginalized!) backgrounds and cross-group friendships. A tagline for such a campaign could be something like "We are Hancock County." It's vitally important to include individuals who fit into the "in the norm" mold as well as those who are out of the norm, as indeed all these people are Hancock County! Such a campaign would show how the community is already diverse.
- Stop using the word and concept of "diversity," shifting instead to the word and concept "inclusion." Even safer choices may be words like "welcoming" and "belonging." Many people will shut down when they catch a whiff of "traditional" I&D, so the easiest way to avoid this is by changing up how the issue is discussed. In marketing, really drive home the point of trying to establish a county that is welcoming for all.

- Furthermore, discuss the concept of welcoming new people to the community by grounding it in the idea of sharing Hancock County's culture and traditions with others. The basic idea you want to express is that the County's culture and traditions will not be altered by any influx of new individuals.
- Pursuant to the previous point, consider implementing this idea through a marketing campaign as well. You may feature people from different backgrounds (including those who are in the norm in the community) discussing some of their favorite things about Hancock County, then ending with a tagline like "Our community is exceptional. Let's share it."

Need: More advocacy for people from marginalized backgrounds who are already in Hancock County.

The focus groups made clear that the best predictors of success for community members from marginalized backgrounds are (1) their social class and (2) whether they have an advocate or ally in the community. You won't be able to do much about the former, but the latter is more changeable. Many of these actions will have the added benefit of encouraging people from different social backgrounds to spend time with each other, which we know will have a positive downstream effect on climate.

Actions:

- Establish "buddy" programs that connect people from different backgrounds.
    - In high school: connect incoming first-year students with a junior or senior to meet with a few times over the course of their first semester. This is useful in helping everyone get more comfortable in school, but particularly useful for those minority students who may otherwise become outcasts.
    - In community: establish a buddy program for incoming residents with folks who are already well-established in the community, then ask them to get together a few times in the first six months they are in town.
- See, above, proposed marketing campaign featuring existing cross-group friendships.
- Continue to support and establish new groups in the community around shared interests (e.g., woodworking, ballroom dance). Ensure that marketing efforts for these groups reach everyone.

Need: Recruit major employers to take more of a lead in I&D efforts.

The people we talked to were extremely cognizant of the significant role Marathon, Whirlpool, and Cooper Tire play in the community. There's some indication that individuals working in these companies recognize the importance of diversifying their workforce. This can be leveraged to reemphasize the importance of diversity to members of the community. It's very important that these messages be framed positively as opposed to being framed as a threat.

Actions:

- Work with leaders of these businesses to create a marketing campaign in which these leaders express how much they enjoy being part of the Hancock County Community and how they're excited to be hiring, sharing some of what makes Hancock County special with new people (see "Let's share it" campaign mentioned earlier). It could be worth having them mention that bringing in new talent is vital to their long-term success, and that they want to help make Hancock County a place where all are welcome.
- Leverage business leaders' desire for a more diverse workforce to increase their engagement in local efforts related to I&D (e.g., by asking a member of the leadership of each company to sit on an I&D taskforce).
- Talk with individuals within these companies about their I&D efforts and consider whether any of the initiatives they have implemented could be replicated in other places in the county (e.g., ERG-equivalent in schools). Having individuals in these companies on I&D task forces would make this an easier lift.

Need: Work to diversity leadership, including Findlay City Council.

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Though the mayor was unambiguously identified as someone who cares about inclusion and wants to work to make the community more diverse and welcoming, the City of Findlay's other civic leaders (i.e., the City Council) were instead identified as individuals who are broadly resistant to change. In a democracy, when the leadership doesn't change, we change the leadership.

Actions:
- Make structural changes to City Council to make membership possible for people who are different from those currently represented (e.g., changing meetings to occur outside normal work hours).
- Discuss the possibility of running for council with individuals from out of the norm groups in the community.
- Identify other opportunities for leadership in the community that do not require leading a political campaign (e.g., committees, advisory councils).

Need: Make Hancock County more attractive to people who are younger and/or belong to marginalized social groups.
Many of the actions listed so far have emphasized how to make people who are already in the community more receptive to diversity. However, you also must get people from outside the community to move there.

Actions:
- Create a one-page document for the area's major employers to include with job offers that features the benefits of living in the community, making a point to mention any relevant affinity groups or upcoming events that could be interesting.
- Make sure the city/county website are up to date and include easy-to-find information for potential new residents. Make sure photos included on the webpage depict people from different backgrounds.
- See above point about creating a housing page.

Need: Dealing with incidents of discrimination and harassment quickly and effectively. (Police, bystander intervention)
One thing that can propagate an exclusive climate is seeing incidents of prejudice and discrimination go unaddressed or not disciplined. Failing to explicitly sanction these actions in practice passively endorses them.

Actions:
- Work with law enforcement to identify and prosecute hate crimes and other discriminatory actions.
- Provide bystander intervention training to community members, particularly for those who are most likely to be in situations where such incidents will occur (e.g., teachers).
- Provide simple tools that general members of the community can use to interrupt bias when they see it occurring and provide support to those who may be targeted by these actions (e.g., saying "That's not ok").