

# NESEA DIVERSITY CAUCUS

OUR REPORT FROM THE  
MARCH 2019 BE BOSTON  
FOCUS GROUP



# LETTER TO NESEA

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Dear NESEA Board, Staff, and Community,

We want to thank you again for accepting our proposal to host the Diversity Caucus (break-out session for people of color, indigenous people, queer, trans and gender non-binary individuals (LGBTQIA), women, and people with disabilities within the larger NESEA community) at the Building Energy Boston 2019 conference. For the first-ever organized NESEA Diversity Caucus, we believe this was a huge success with over 75 people attending. It was a meaningful and energizing moment for us, as the conveners and for the attendees of the caucus. Open and honest conversations were had and many great connections were made. We had committed to sharing with NESEA some of the wisdom gained from this experience, as well as specific suggestions made by caucus participants, and our thoughts to NESEA for moving forward.

This Report is broken into four talking points:

- What's the problem?
- Why does diversity matter and how does it relate to NESEA?
- Voices from the Diversity Caucus
- Where do we go from here?

Thank you for taking the time to read through this letter.

Respectfully,

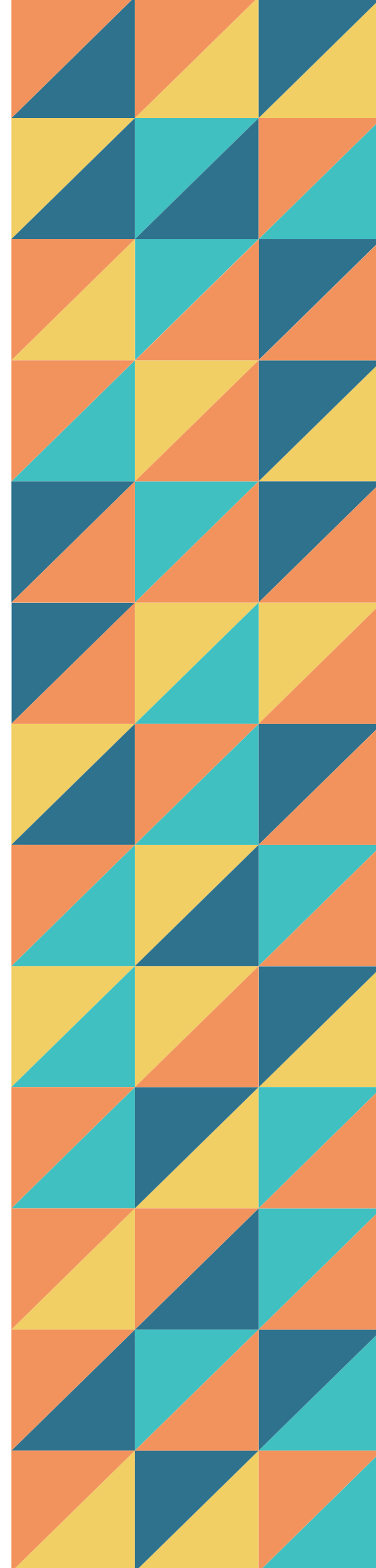
Diversity Caucus Conveners:

**Mel Baiser, HELM Construction Solutions, they/them**

**Miriam Gee, CoEverything, she/her**

**Maria Washington, Byggmeister, she/her**

**Ace McArleton, New Frameworks, he/him**



# WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

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**We are all well aware that we are in the  
midst of a climate emergency.**

Reversing the climate crisis is going to take all of us. As the 2019 BE Boston keynote speakers pointed out, “we cannot ‘net zero’ our way out of this problem” nor can we continue to preach to the choir. Now is the time for taking risks and trying new strategies. Maintaining the status quo is not enough. NESEA’s organizational leadership in this movement is critical, particularly given the construction industry’s role in climate change. We feel NESEA’s board, membership and conference attendees do not reflect the demographic diversity of the construction industry at large with regards to race, gender, sexuality, gender identity, ability, and immigration status. While we recognize that NESEA’s staff itself is more diverse and the board make-up has changed considerably over the past couple years, historically, the board, membership, conference attendees and presenters have been majority white, able-bodied, cisgender men. NESEA’s membership and attendees trend towards an older generation and there is a notable absence of youth at the gatherings. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and xenophobia are real and on the rise in our country. These institutional oppressions and the microaggressions that support them are alive and well in our industry and even present in our progressive professional circles and organizations. Caucus participants shared countless stories of experiencing harassment and biases in their workplaces and industry-related events.



# WHY DOES DIVERSITY MATTER AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO NESEA?

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**(We want to) broaden the demographic diversity of NESEA membership to better reflect the constituency NESEA serves. NESEA must grow its membership in order to increase its impact.**

For NESEA's organizational health and longevity, it must remain relevant to younger people in this country; this group is also inherently more diverse than older generations. It is no surprise that the construction industry is experiencing a labor shortage crisis. The Associated General Contractors of America reports that 80% of construction companies surveyed are having a difficult time filling new positions. There is a need to fill nearly 250,000 construction jobs each month nationwide. Meanwhile, very few young people are entering the trades and we have a government actively restricting immigration and performing illegal sweeps and detentions of immigrant workers. Strategic recruitment of young people, people of color, immigrants, women, gender non conforming, and trans folks is not only critical to the survival of the industry but for NESEA's survival as well. As an example, only 3.4% of construction workers are female. There is no data on what % are gender nonconforming or trans. Most of the larger unions have picked up on this and are doing targeting recruitment campaigns.



# WHY DOES DIVERSITY MATTER AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO NESEA?

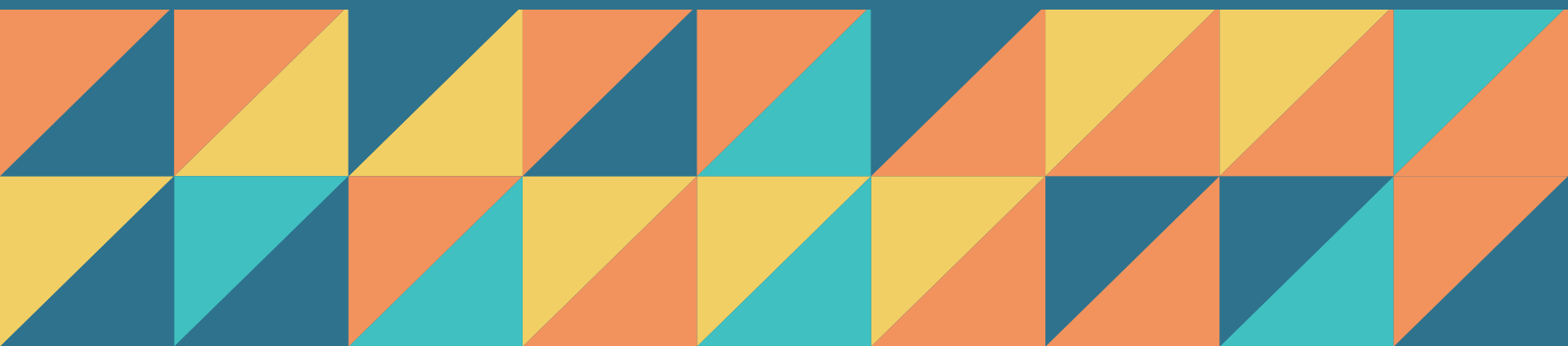
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**We recognize that NESEA leadership is aware of this issue and has already made an organizational commitment with its strategic plan:**

*“With an initial focus on Emerging Professionals, broaden the demographic diversity of NESEA membership to better reflect the constituency NESEA serves. NESEA must grow its membership in order to increase its impact. The initial focus will be on attracting Emerging Professionals (EPs), who we define as individuals who have been working in renewable energy, high-performance building, or a related industry for less than five years, for the following reasons:*

- NESEA Staff has already initiated outreach to EPs.*
- EPs are inherently a more diverse group (racially, socio-economically, ethnically) than other groups.*
- It is important to NESEA’s long-term sustainability that we cultivate the next generation of practitioners and leaders.*

*After improving, refining, and documenting current campaigns to attract EPs, Staff will replicate those efforts to target other groups.”*





# WHY DOES DIVERSITY MATTER AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO NESEA?

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From a pragmatic point of view, if NESEA leadership and membership better reflect both the architecture, construction, and engineering community at large and the communities most impacted by climate change, it increases our ability to tackle the causes of climate change and respond to the outcomes together. NESEA's goals around slowing climate change will be strengthened with a climate justice lens. Climate justice re-frames the environmentalist movement to look at how climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities; therefore our response to climate change must include voices from most impacted communities. NESEA has made a commitment to the triple bottom line. The People part of the TBL is more than simply maintaining owner(s)' work/life balance and paying employees a good salary with benefits. We need to examine who we are including and excluding in the industry and high-performance building conversations.

**Shouldn't we question who gets to have access to the incredible education and training that NESEA has to offer?**



# VOICES FROM THE DIVERSITY CAUCUS

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It is worth mentioning that along with the Diversity Caucus, we also submitted a proposal for a BE19 panel presentation to highlight issues of diversity in our industry that was intended to be open to the public (vs. restricted, like the Diversity Caucus). The proposed panel could have provided an opportunity to engage the conference attendees in this conversation and share tips and tools for helping other building professionals. The hope was that the two sessions would target different audiences but provide a valuable opportunity for NESEA to demonstrate its commitment to this topic. We understand that there are far more proposals submitted than there are slots, but we were disappointed that the Conference Content Committee rejected the panel presentation. We engaged in numerous one-on-one conversations (primarily with white, cis men) who felt frustrated and left out because their participation was not welcomed at the caucus. After explaining the reasons for a caucus, all of them expressed a desire to learn more and mentioned they would have attended a session on the topic had there been one.

**Allies to the Diversity Caucus have expressed a desire to learn more about how to support diversity, equity and inclusion in the high performance building community and within NESEA.**



# VOICES FROM THE DIVERSITY CAUCUS

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**The caucus attendees shared how powerful it was to be in a space where their experiences, identities, and voices were being prioritized.**

Even at a BE Conference where there are many shared values, older, white, cis men tend to dominate the presentations as well as the Q & A portions of the sessions. We understand that some of this is the need for more marginalized folks to attend the conference to begin with, to provide leadership by submitting proposals, and to muster up the courage to raise their hands and speak up during Q & A. That said, these challenges cannot be put on marginalized populations to resolve on their own. We'd like to ask that the NESEA board and Conference Chairs and Content Committee play a role in ensuring that there continues to be more diversity represented amongst the board, membership, conference attendees, and the presenters.





# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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## **We compiled a list of suggestions for next steps proposed by attendees and conveners of the Diversity Caucus.**

We look forward to a continued conversation with you and are excited for opportunities to support and hold accountable NESEA board, staff and conference leadership on this topic.

- Commit to creating space for a Diversity Caucus (or caucuses) at every future Building Energy conference provided there are folks willing to organize and participate in it.
- Institutionalize this as part of the BE programming rather than it needing to be a session that is voted on by the Content Committee.
- Gather demographic data as part of the registration process for all future NESEA sponsored conferences and events in order to track current statistics and progress.
- Conduct a survey of existing NESEA members including questions about demographics in order to track current statistics and progress.
- Formalize a relationship of accountability with the Diversity Caucus and/or create a separate anti-bias working group with whom to consult on related topics. The details of what this means would need to be further developed.
- Survey demographics of NESEA leadership (staff, board, conference chairs, content committee, BEBL facilitators) and set demographic diversity goals to work towards.



# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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- Consider demographics and representation as a factor when evaluating which proposals are selected for future conference sessions, which businesses are confirmed for BEBL participation, or which case studies are highlighted for NESEA pro-tours.
- Establish goals around the balance of sessions dedicated to people, planet, profit. Prioritize having at least one conference session annually that touches on themes of diversity, equity or inclusion.
- Bring in a keynote speaker who can address issues of intersectionality and climate justice.
- Evaluate who has access to the BE conferences and NESEA programming in general.
- Assess where marketing takes place and how outreach happens.
- Consider sliding scale conference fees and/or a scholarship program for minority-owned businesses and workers.
- Provide the option for some businesses or sponsors to subsidize this by paying it forward.
- Consider how conference fees could be based on the national wage gap (i.e. women (all races) earn \$0.79 for every \$1.00 earned by men; and women of color only \$0.74).
- Develop a relationship with a local minority-run climate justice, housing, or trades-related organization and provide them with a free table and conference tickets for the BE conferences as a way of raising awareness about their work, thereby increasing access to NESEA's educational opportunities and reaching more diverse populations.



# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Offer sliding scale/scholarship for minority businesses to participate in BEBL.
- Create programming to provide free or low-cost workshops on building science/high-performance building geared towards low-income tradespeople and/or minority-owned businesses.
- Create more relationships/partnerships between trades schools, community colleges, and unions represented in disadvantaged communities and NESEA member businesses.
- Do an assessment of barriers that may exist at NESEA programming which prevent full participation from individuals with disabilities. Offer translation, ASL and other measures to make NESEA events more accessible.
- Ensure that gender-neutral bathrooms are available at future conferences and events.
- Add pronouns to all name tags.
- Incorporate an understanding of the indigenous communities who occupied (occupy) the physical land that NESEA conferences and events occur on. Acknowledge the leadership that indigenous communities bring to the climate justice movement.
- Provide anti-bias, anti-racism, equity and inclusion training for NESEA board, staff, conference leadership and BEBL facilitators.
- Continue to develop the work with emerging professionals and include language about the Diversity Caucus in the EP programming.
- Develop a way to formally recognize businesses that promote equity, inclusion, and social justice effectively in our community.

**Thank you for  
reading our Report!**  
– the Conveners of the  
*Diversity Caucus*

