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Executive Summary

Looking Forward[®] DEI 2023

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Letter from the President

Are we experiencing the sunset of DEI as we know it?

In 2021, Association Laboratory watched as associations struggled to understand and adapt to the catalyst of the George Floyd murder and subsequent protests. As association leaders committed to advancing the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion, what became quickly apparent was the need for more information informing these activities.

Later that year, Association Laboratory published Looking Forward® DEI, the first association sector study examining these issues. Our goal was to begin helping associations take a data-driven, not opinion-driven, approach to these discussions.

The research indicated there was a genuine desire by leaders to improve the association as a platform for members' success, and the consideration of DEI was one aspect of this desire.

In 2023, while still important, we see association leaders needing help with the reality of implementing DEI as opposed to the aspirational goal of DEI.

DEI issues are often fraught with potential controversy as individuals argue about their perspectives, the scope of the association's efforts, and their priority, given competing calls on association resources.

DEI topics are subjective and complicated. It is easy to get caught in media or special interest group arguments that are less fact-based and more divisive. This makes good-faith efforts by leaders to address these issues difficult.

Without better information to inform DEI discussions, the association profession will continue to get bogged down in subjective, opinion-driven debate. The profession will continue to be driven by academic-driven perceptions of these concepts that make progress more difficult.

Now in its 3rd year, Looking Forward® DEI provides the association sector with a continuing look at how association executives perceive the issues of DEI, the challenges representing the most substantial barriers to success, and the strategies they hope will allow them to make progress.

Association Laboratory aims to investigate what works and does not work in association leadership and apply these lessons to association strategy and structure. The company is designed to help association leaders make better decisions using information.

Looking Forward® DEI is part of the Looking Forward® family of association sector research reports designed to give association leaders the data necessary for effective leadership. Please use this information to guide discussions within your organization. Association Laboratory is committed to helping you address the issues critical to success.

If I or my team can ever assist, please contact us. We look forward to working with you.



Dean West, FASAE
President and Founder
Association Laboratory Inc.



Association Laboratory Research Alliance



Association Laboratory is proud to be the founder and leader of the Association Laboratory Research Alliance®.

The Association Laboratory Research Alliance® is a collaboration of more than 20 state, national, specialty, and global societies of association executives designed to investigate, lead the discussion of, and provide insight into the future of the association business model.

Since its inception, the Association Laboratory Research Alliance® has investigated the forces shaping association members and the implications of these forces on association strategy. Through research reports, customizable dashboards, and virtual and in-person seminars, the Alliance provides the most recent, relevant, and helpful information for association leaders to learn about the future of associations.

The Association Laboratory Research Alliance® produces three sector studies under the Looking Forward® banner critical to association sector thought leadership.

- **Looking Forward® Impact** – This global environmental scan of the association strategy environment identifies the factors with the most significant impact on association members and the challenges these factors create for associations.
- **Looking Forward® Solutions** – This study assesses more than 135 different strategies that association leaders believe are important to success, given the influences on their members and the challenges these factors create.
- **Looking Forward® DEI** – The leading study in the association sector investigates perceptions of DEI issues, the challenges associations perceive in practical DEI work, and the strategies associations pursue to address these challenges.

To access the most relevant, recent, and helpful association sector research, visit the [Looking Forward Dashboard](#).

Thanks to our Partners

Association Laboratory would like to thank three companies essential to the continued collection and dissemination of quality association sector research.

Gravitate

Gravitate's Nucleus data analytics platform was built specifically for associations and is designed to meet the unique needs of the member industry.



It aggregates the vast amounts of robust member data currently stored in different systems across member-based organizations (AMS, email marketing, events, learning management, online community, and more). It makes insights into this data available to everyone: staff, leadership, components, the board – and even members.

The [Looking Forward® Dashboard](#) is Nucleus, specially configured to show this vital sector research and allow you to explore it.

Gravitate is thrilled to have been selected as the official data analytics solution of the Association Laboratory Research Alliance and hopes you enjoy this new way to benefit from the Looking Forward study.

You are invited to browse the [Analytics for Associations Success Kit](#) to learn more about Nucleus and to contact us to discuss use cases at your organization at analytics@gravitatesolutions.com

CE21

CE21 is a cloud-based technology and services company providing a full-service Learning Management System (LMS) that delivers distance education, online registration, and physical product sales solutions.



The company serves professional education verticals, including Legal, Accounting, Health Care, Insurance, Business, Education Content Providers, Professional & Trade Associations, and Non-Profit Organizations.

[Association Laboratory uses CE21's LMS system to give us more capacity and capability to provide leading-edge content to association leaders. You can see the system in action at Association Laboratory's Knowledge Center.](#)

CE21's award-winning LMS can help your organization deliver a best-in-class e-learning experience explicitly designed for your most important customers –learners.

Built for today but designed with the flexibility to meet tomorrow's changing needs, CE21 provides an elegant, mobile-optimized online learning environment that transforms your organization into a 24/7 on-demand value provider.

For more information, visit CE21.com.

Current Status of DEI in the Association Sector

Looking Forward® (DEI) 2023 asked respondents to identify the current state of DEI discussions at their association. Response options regarding current perceptions of DEI were grouped into the following domains.

- **Importance** - How important is DEI to the future success of the association, and what is its scope within the association?
- **Scope** – What is the scope of association DEI efforts?
- **Leadership** – How is DEI being led at associations?
- **Effectiveness** – Do associations believe they are making progress?
- **Future Activity** – What activities do associations anticipate implementing?
- **Barriers to Success** – What issues are impeding efforts at DEI?
- **Diversity** – What are activities specific to diversity?
- **Equity** - What are activities specific to equity?
- **Inclusion** – What are activities specific to Inclusion?

The Importance of D, E, and I

Looking Forward® DEI, 2021, asked respondents to assess the importance of DEI to the success of their association. Preliminary research indicated that these three concepts, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, were often conflated. In 2022, Looking Forward® DEI began investigating the importance of these concepts separately. The following shows the response to this question by all respondents for 2022 and 2023.

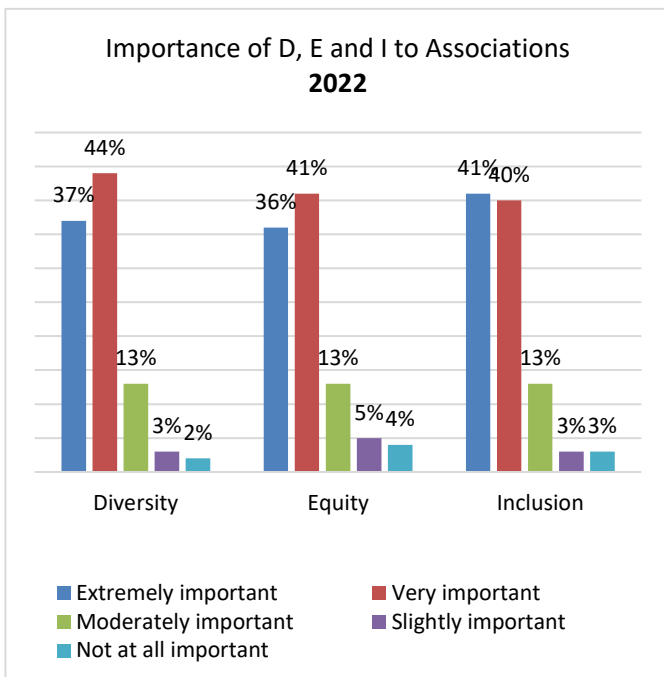


FIGURE 1 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2022

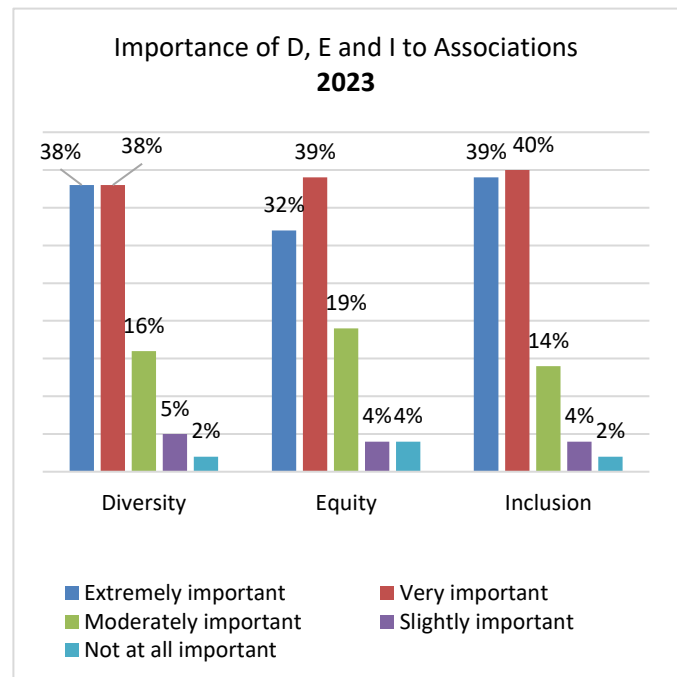


FIGURE 2 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2023

Question text: How important will working on each of the following concepts be to your association over the next year?

Most respondents believe all three concepts are important to work on at their association.

The Scope of DEI

Respondents were asked to assess the scope of their DEI efforts. The goal was to ascertain if associations were primarily taking an inward-looking approach (e.g., staff or Board) and external focus (e.g., membership or workforce) if an “all of the above” or holistic approach was the focus.

Overwhelmingly, respondents continue to state that their association is taking a holistic approach to DEI.

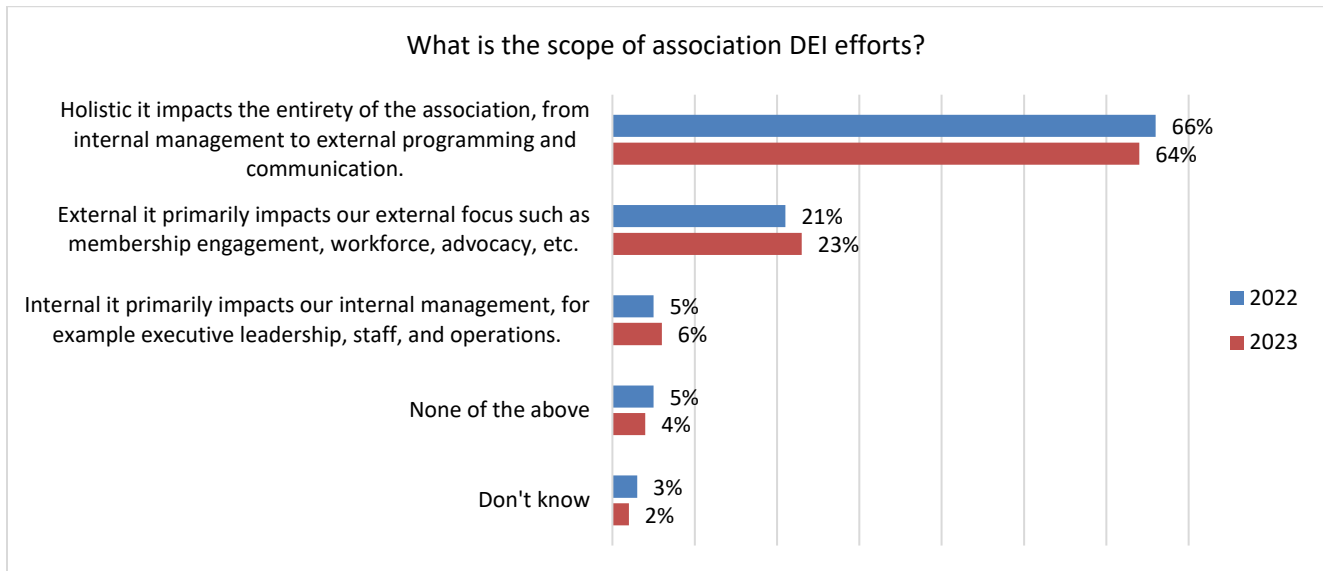


FIGURE 3 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Which of the following best describes the reach of your activity in DEI or related concepts? Select only one.

DEI Leadership

Responsibility for DEI

Looking Forward® DEI 2021 discovered that DEI was a “top-down” effort led by association senior leaders. Only 6% of respondents said members initiated their DEI efforts.

Beginning in 2022, Looking Forward® DEI investigated who was explicitly charged with ensuring that DEI efforts were successful.

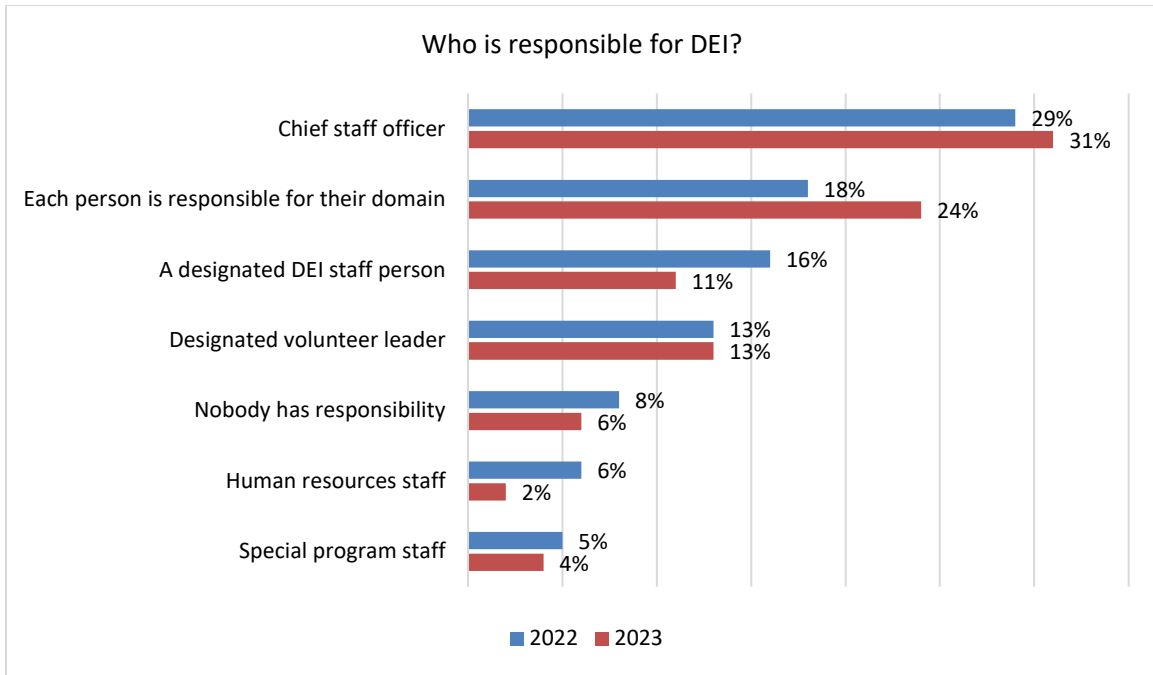


FIGURE 4 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Who is most responsible for leading DEI activities or initiatives at the association? Select only one.

Respondents say the chief staff officer is primarily in charge of DEI activities, but 1 out of 4 indicate individual staff are responsible for DEI within their domain or area of responsibility. person within their domain is responsible.

Association Laboratory concludes that associations use staff without professional training or education in DEI to lead these efforts and are increasingly less likely to hire or use a designated DEI staff person.

DEI Effectiveness

Gauging the effectiveness of efforts is important to understanding what works and does not work. Association Laboratory hypothesized that DEI efforts might be focused on distinct areas of the association and, as a result, exhibit different levels of effectiveness.

Respondents were asked to assess their level of success on the separate concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

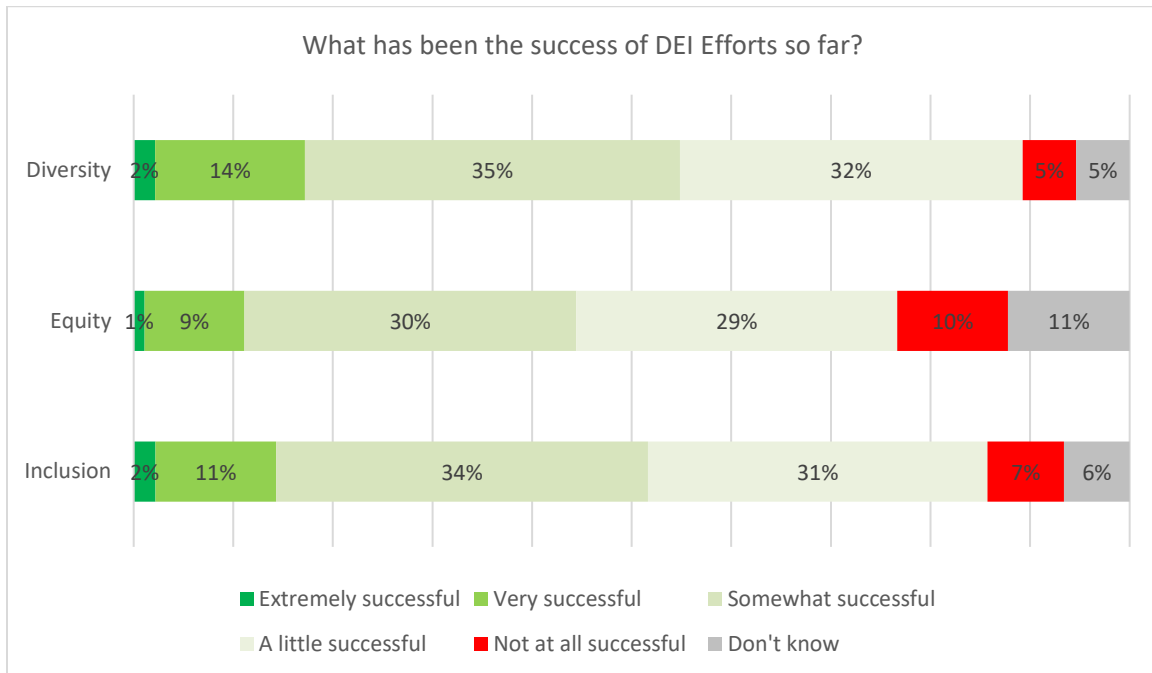


FIGURE 5 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2023

Question text: To date, how successful do you believe your organization's strategies related to DEI have been?

Overall, respondents continue to struggle based on their self-evaluation.

- Diversity – 16% say they are very or extremely successful
- Equity – 10% say they are very or extremely successful
- Inclusion – 13% say they are very or extremely successful

Future DEI Activities

Identifying future strategic direction provides evidence of the strategies association leaders believe will be successful.

DEI Strategic Direction

Respondents were asked to identify anticipated future DEI policy changes throughout the association. Notable is the focus on incorporating DEI concepts into the strategic plan and establishing formal goals for DEI initiatives.

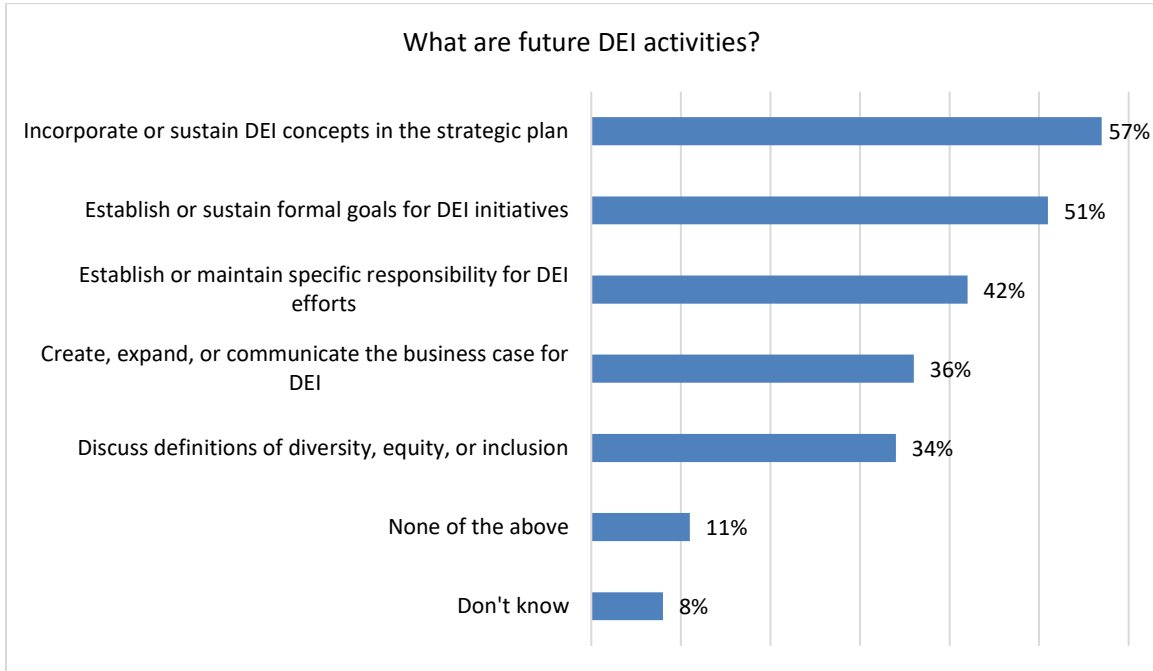


FIGURE 6 LOOKING FORWARD DEI 2023

Question text: To date, how successful do you believe your organization's strategies related to DEI have been?

Barriers to DEI Success

DEI is a complex topic that can be viewed through a variety of lenses. In addition, making any strategic change is inherently complex. This difficulty increases as more stakeholder groups are brought into the discussion. Looking Forward® DEI assessed the primary barriers respondents believed were most challenging.

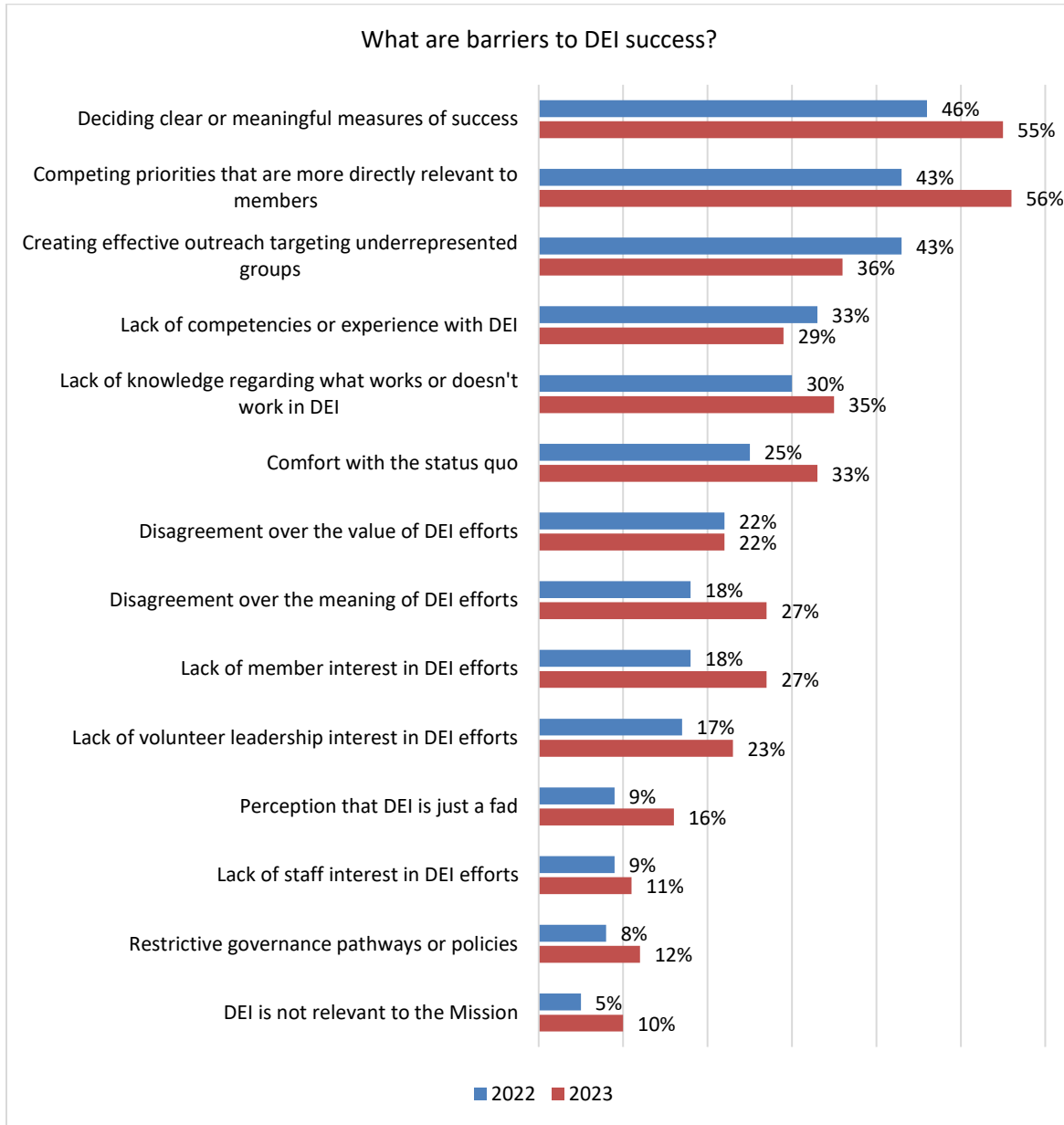


FIGURE 7 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Which of the following barriers are inhibiting your association's DEI efforts? Select all that apply.

In summary, three challenges top the list.

1. How do we measure success?
2. How do we balance DEI efforts (and corresponding resources) relative to other priorities?
3. How do we address the growing resistance to DEI activity?

Resource Challenges

Respondents need help identifying and sustaining staff and financial resources necessary for success.

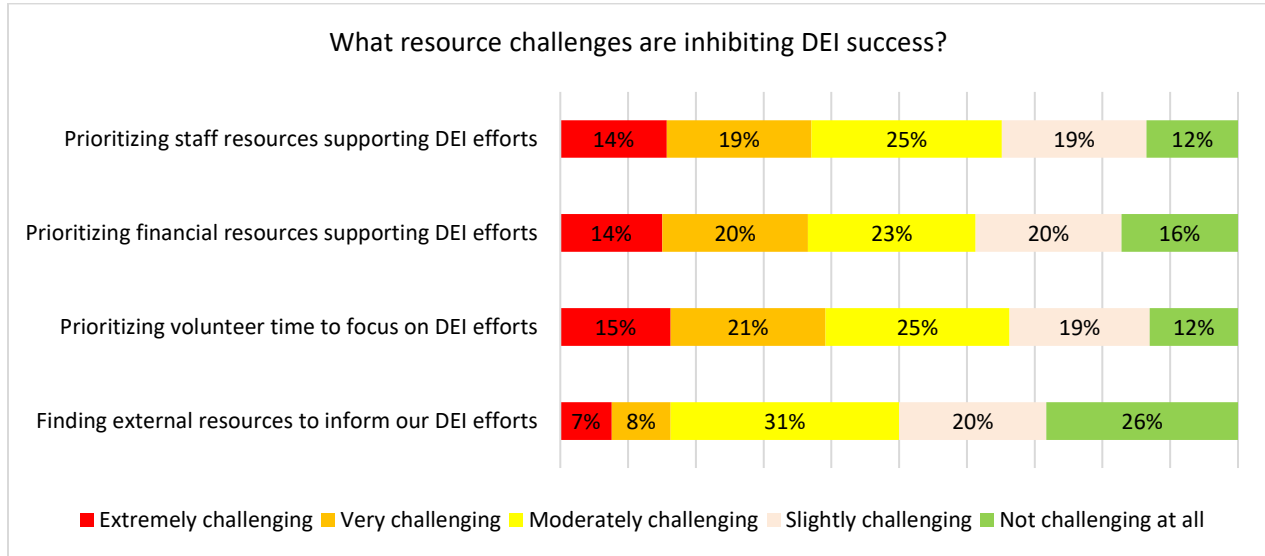


FIGURE 8 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2023

Question text: How challenging will each of the following be to your organization's DEI efforts over the next year?

Associations are increasingly challenged to prioritize time and resources for DEI activities that compete with other priorities.

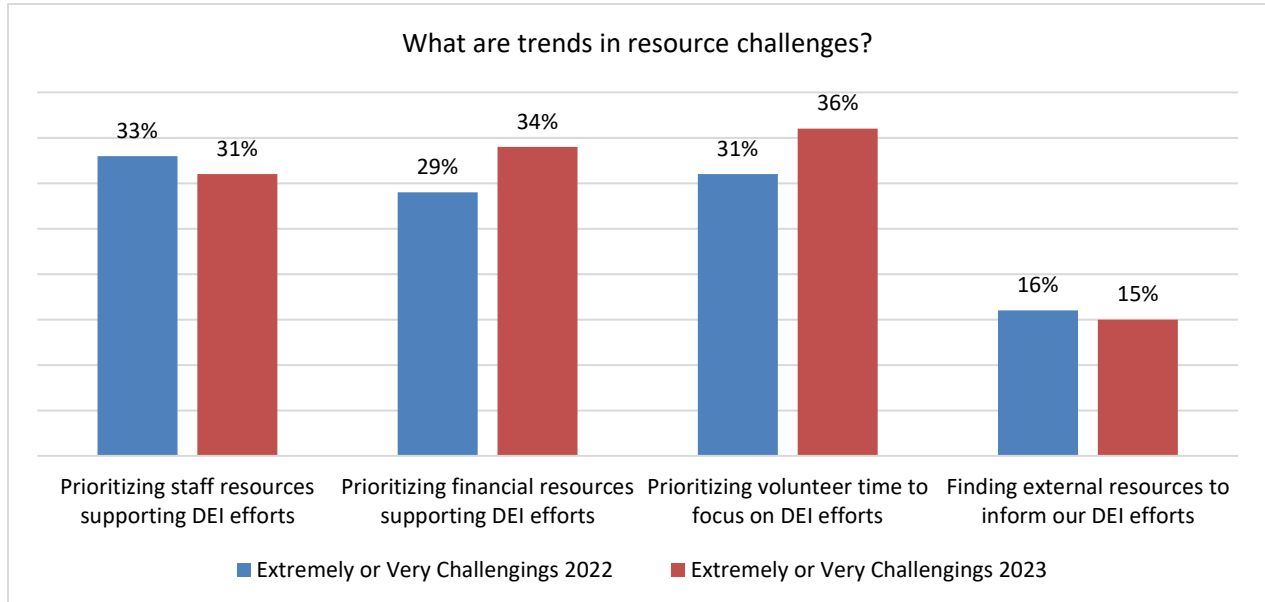


FIGURE 9 LOOKING FORWARD TRENDS

Question text: How challenging will each of the following be to your organization's DEI efforts over the next year?

Diversity

Looking Forward® DEI 2021 researched individual diversity, not organizational or other types of diversity, such as member or member company. Since 2021, Looking Forward® DEI has separated diversity concepts from equity and inclusion concepts to clarify each idea more.

The following highlights key findings specific to diversity and compares the results where appropriate.

Definition of Personal Diversity

The primary focus of respondents continues to be on racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. There is also an increasing focus on professional roles or titles, as associations are presumed to be interested in expanding their market reach within their profession or industry.

The following shows the responses to this question of all respondents.

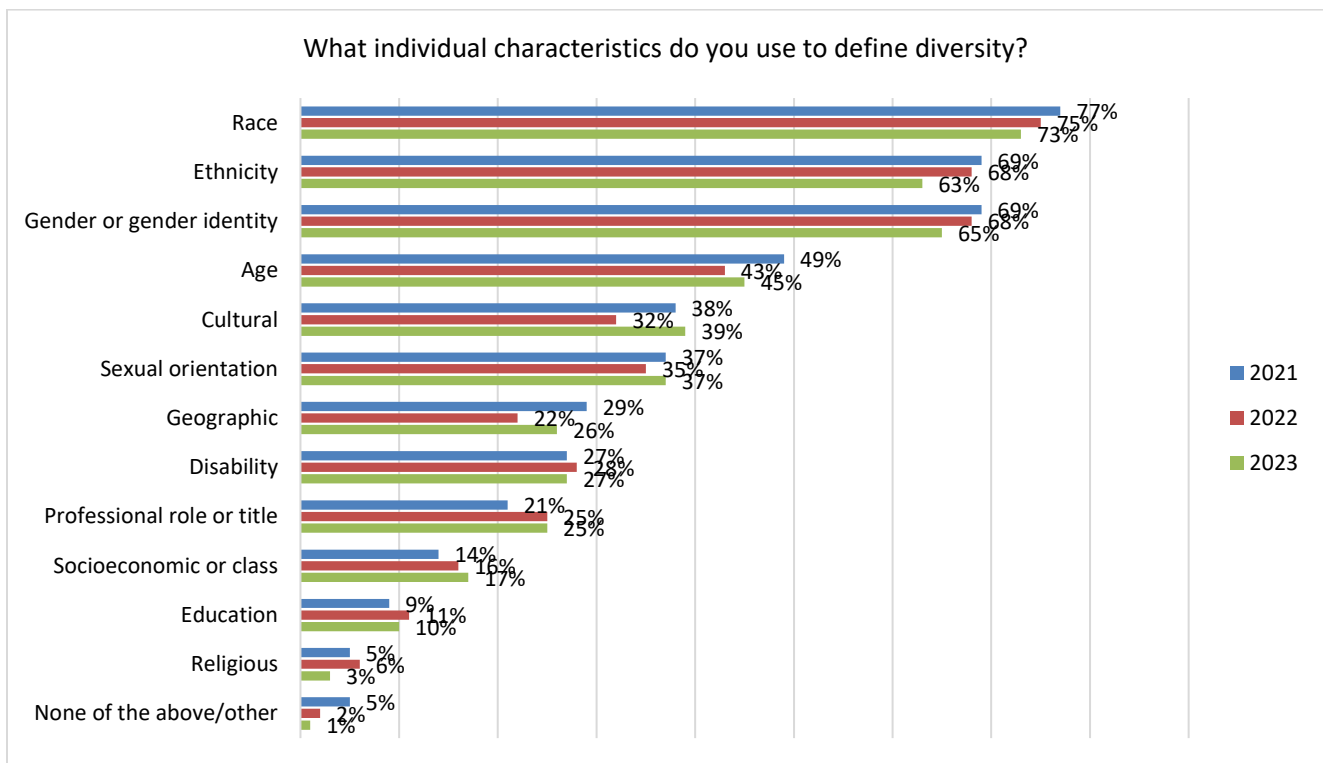


FIGURE 10 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Individual or personal diversity can have many meanings to different people. When your association considers “individual diversity,” which areas are most critical over the next year? Select up to five.

Concerns About Association Stakeholder Diversity

Associations are often concerned about the diversity of the association’s volunteer or staff leadership. Looking Forward® DEI 2021 assessed the level of concern regarding various stakeholders or leadership groups.

The following chart identifies the level of concern by respondents with their association’s diversity within different areas of association leadership.

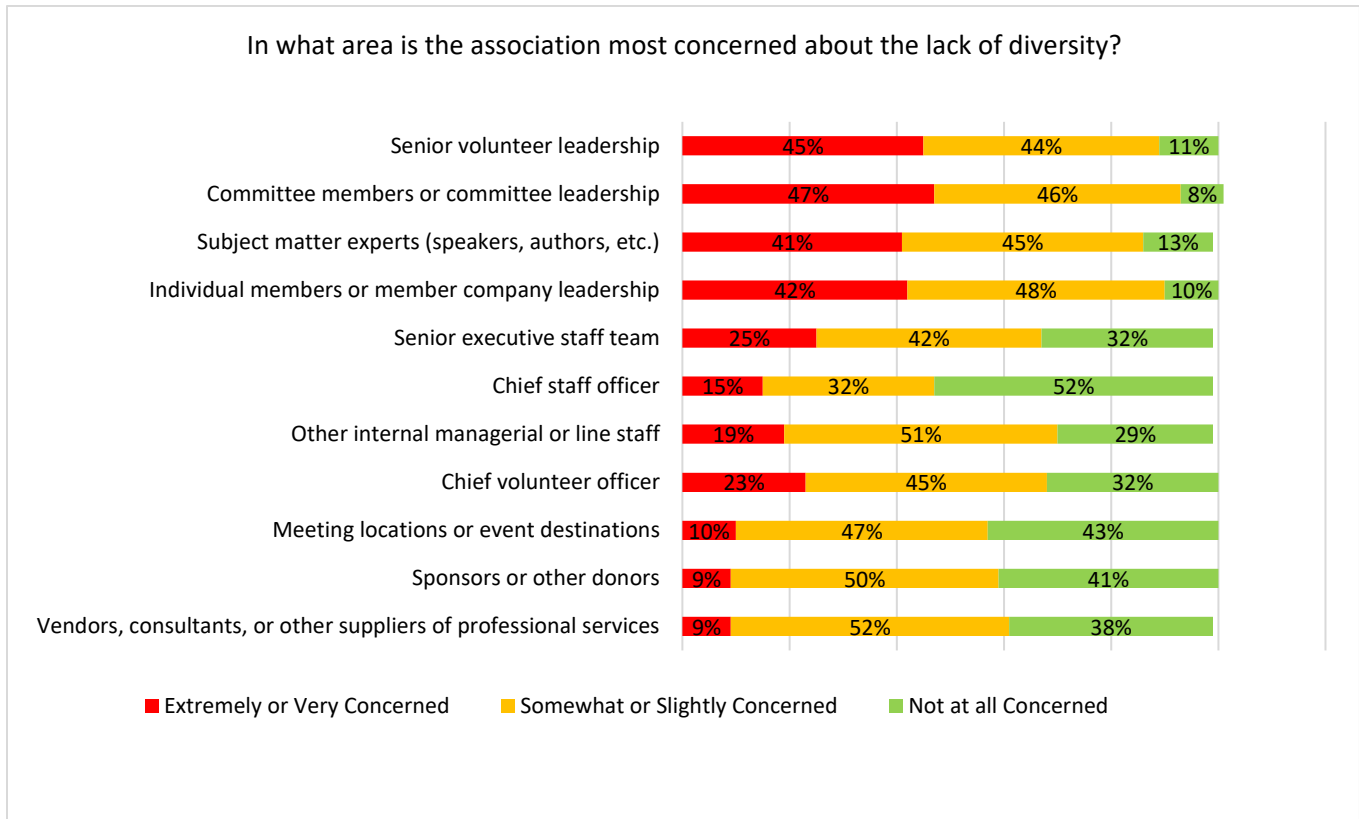


FIGURE 11 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2021

Question text: How concerned is your association’s leadership about a lack of diversity in each of the following?

Diversity Initiation Point

For example, top-down change is often used to make changes quickly during an association turnaround. Since people are naturally resistant to change, a top-down approach often creates or increases resistance.

The biggest problem in changing any organization is resistance to change. The more complex, controversial, or personal the topic, the more challenging change becomes.

As a result, Association Laboratory believed it was essential to identify the source or initiation point of these discussions. Are these bottom-up demands of members or top-down initiatives of volunteer leadership or staff?

By understanding the direction of change, the association can select strategies that improve the likelihood of success.

Looking Forward® DEI 2021 shows that discussions centered around diversity typically start internally with relatively weak influence from external sources. 70% of conversations about DEI began at the Board of Directors or staff level. The following shows the response to this question by all respondents.

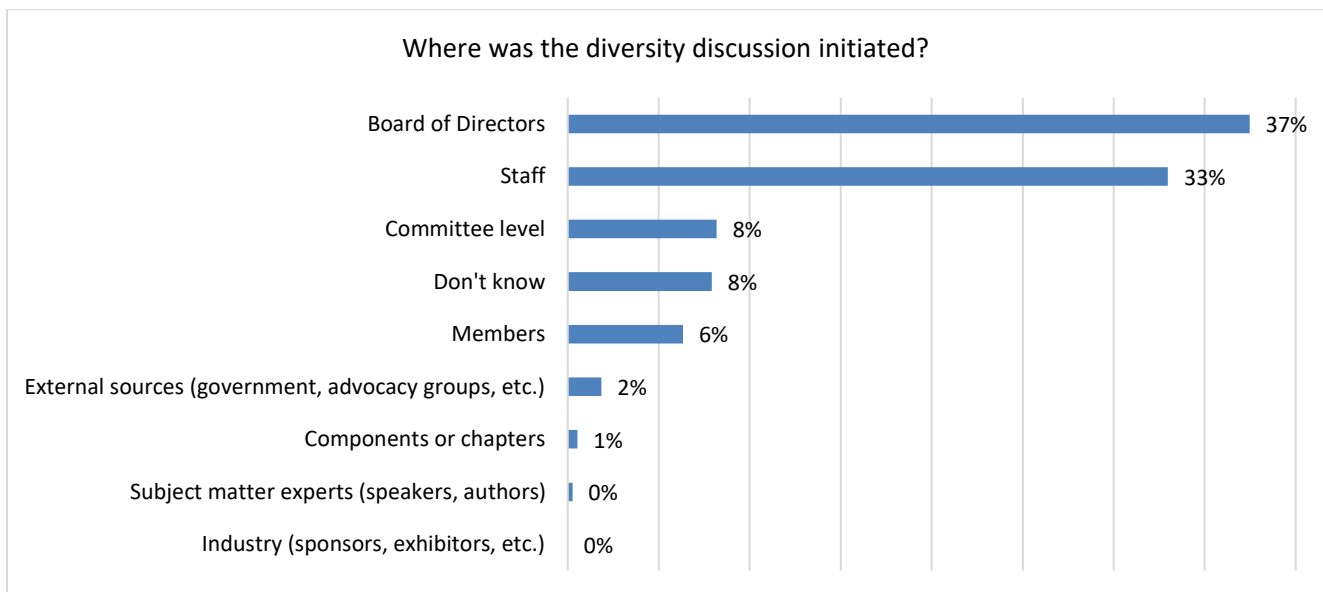


FIGURE 12 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2021

Question text: *Where was the discussion of diversity first conceived or initiated at the association? Select only one.*

Association Diversity Initiatives

Respondents from Looking Forward® DEI were asked to identify what specific strategies they were implementing to improve diversity within their association.

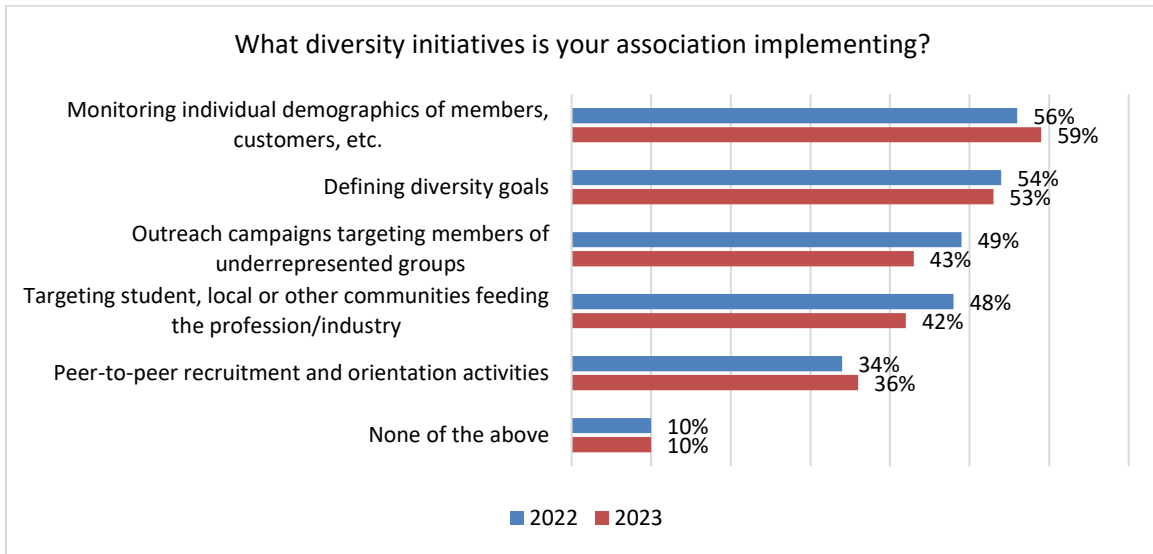


FIGURE 13 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Which of the following **diversity** initiatives is your association sustaining or implementing over the next year? Select all that apply.

Anticipated Impact of Improved Diversity

Respondents from Looking Forward® DEI were asked to identify the intended impact or outcome resulting from improved diversity within their association or its membership. The following shows the anticipated results of diversity initiatives.

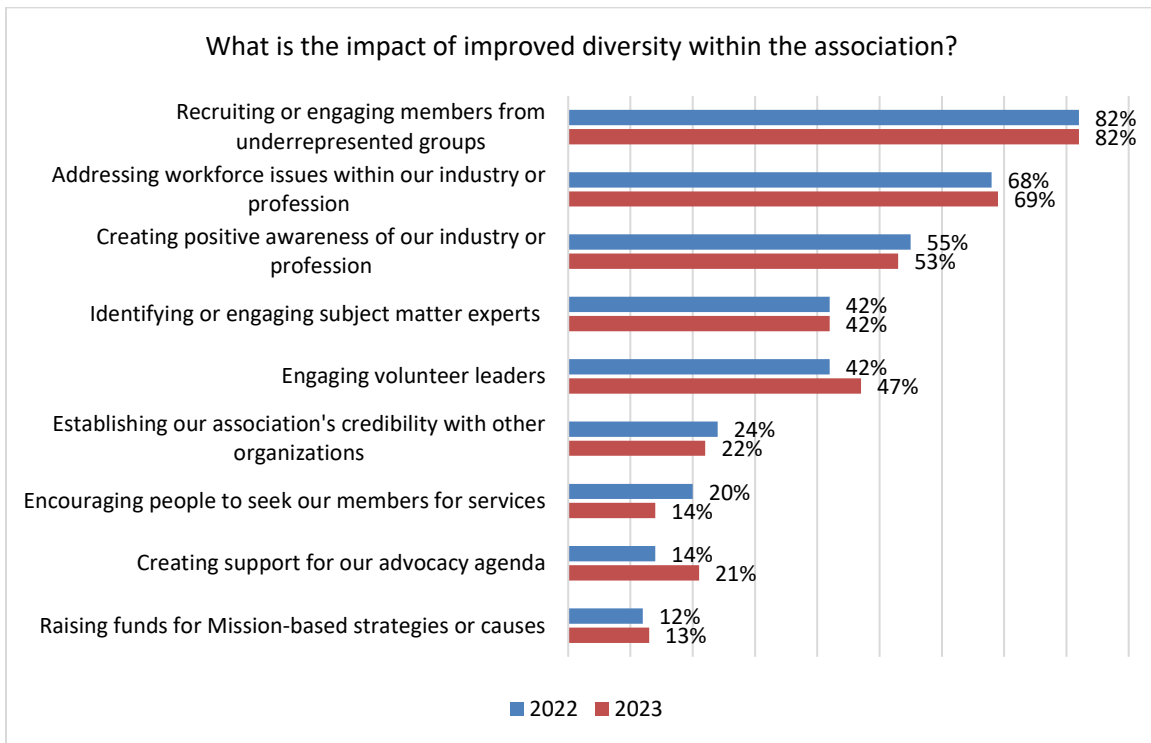


FIGURE 14 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: *In which of the following areas would increasing diversity in your association or its membership create the most impact? Select all that apply.*

Equity

In 2021, Association Laboratory concluded from the research that the issue of “equity” was not as well understood or as crucial to associations.

“Equity is newer, less well defined or understood and there is less consensus on its importance or meaning across professions and industries.”

Looking Forward® DEI 2021

As a result, a research goal moving forward was to collect more specific insight into perceptions of equity by association executives.

Perceptions of Equity

The following chart highlights the level of agreement with equity statements devised from a qualitative data review.

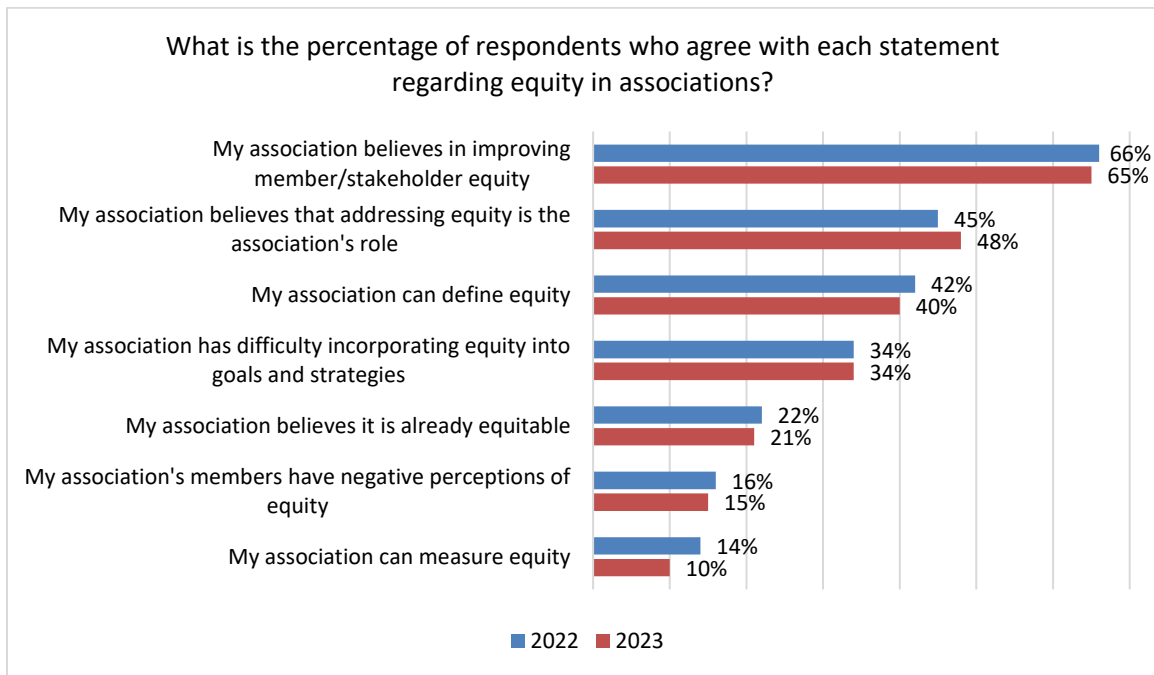


FIGURE 15 LOOKING FORWARD DEI TRENDS

Question text: *How much do you agree with the following statements regarding equity at your association?*

While respondents were in favor of improving member or stakeholder equity (66% agree), they struggled with measuring it (48% disagree) and incorporating it into goals and strategies (33% disagree). In addition, respondents indicate high levels of resistance due to negative views of equity or the perception that the association is already equitable.

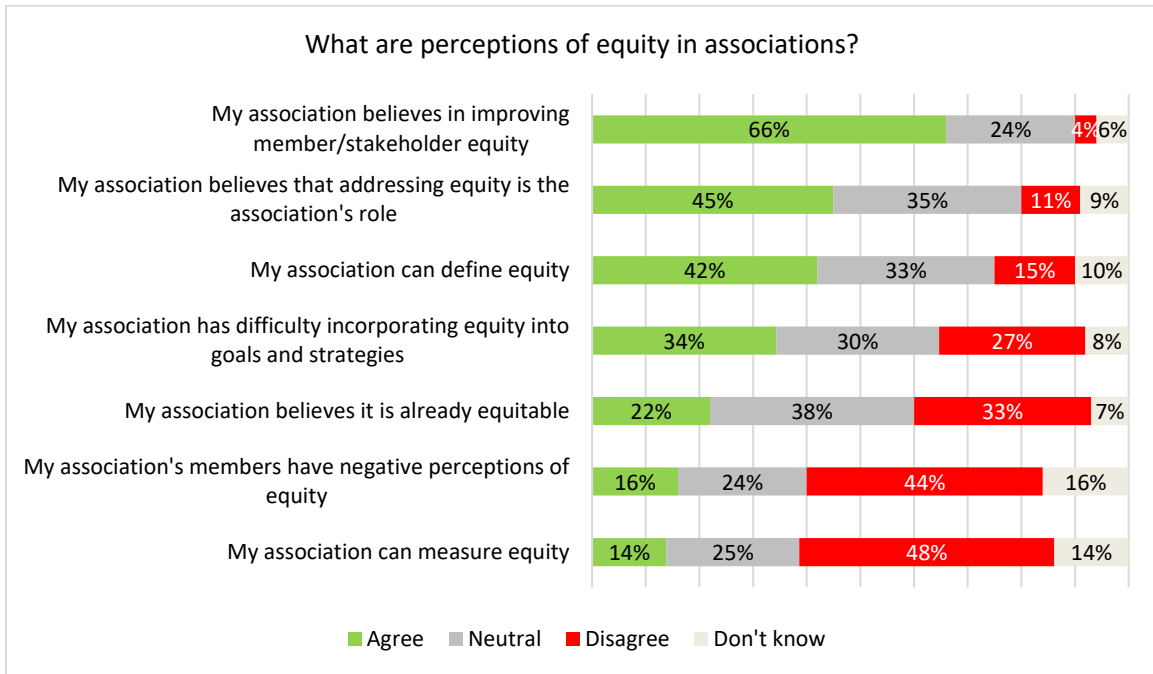


FIGURE 16 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2023

Question text: How much do you agree with the following statements regarding **equity** at your association?

Equity Initiatives

After investigating perceptions, the study sought to identify initiatives specifically addressing equity. The following identifies the programs respondents are implementing during the next year.

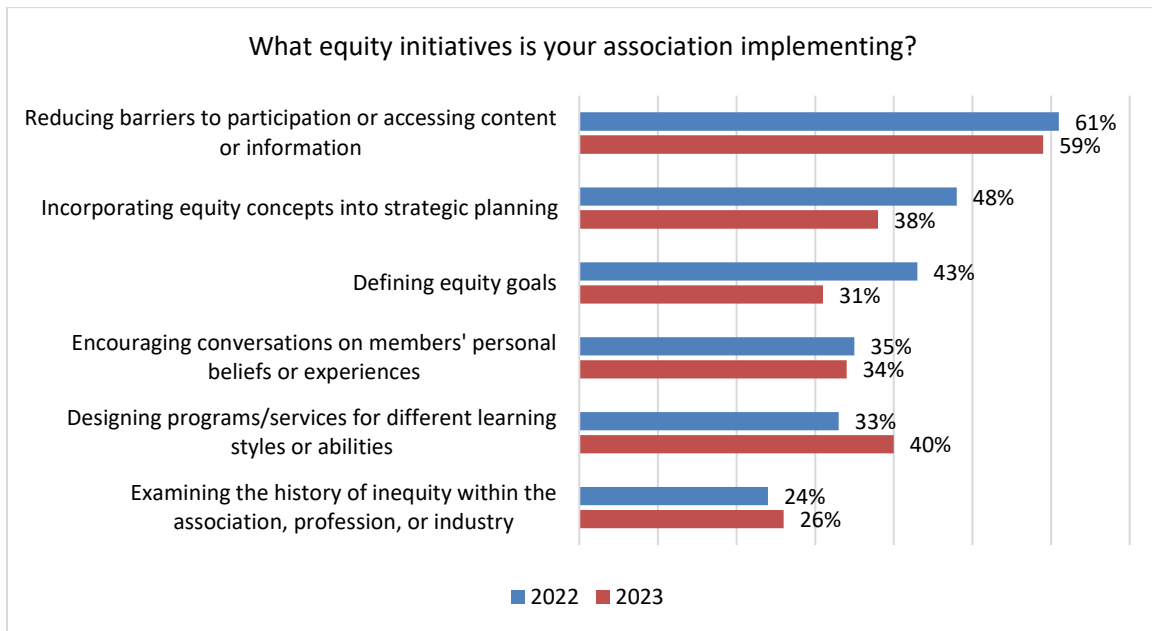


FIGURE 17 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Which of the following **equity** initiatives is your association sustaining or implementing over the next year? Select all that apply.

“Equity” can have different meanings for different people. **Association Laboratory concludes** that associations view equity through the lens of expanded or more accessible access to the association's programs, services, or initiatives.

Inclusion

In 2021, Association Laboratory’s research did not effectively isolate and test concepts specific to inclusion. In 2023, Looking Forward® DEI examined inclusion separately to assess perceptions and potential inclusion initiatives.

Perceptions of Inclusion

The following chart highlights the level of agreement with inclusion statements devised from a qualitative data review.

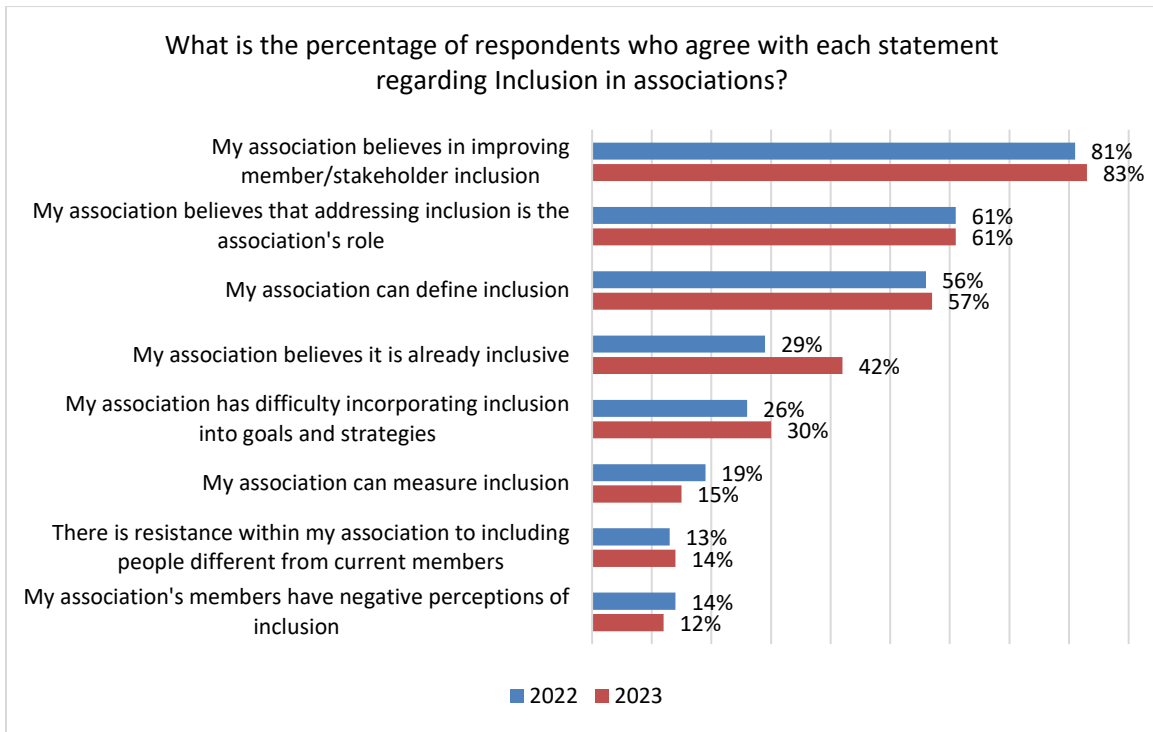


FIGURE 18 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: How much do you agree with the following statements regarding **inclusion** at your association?

The most substantial change is the increase in agreement with the perception that the association already considers itself inclusive.

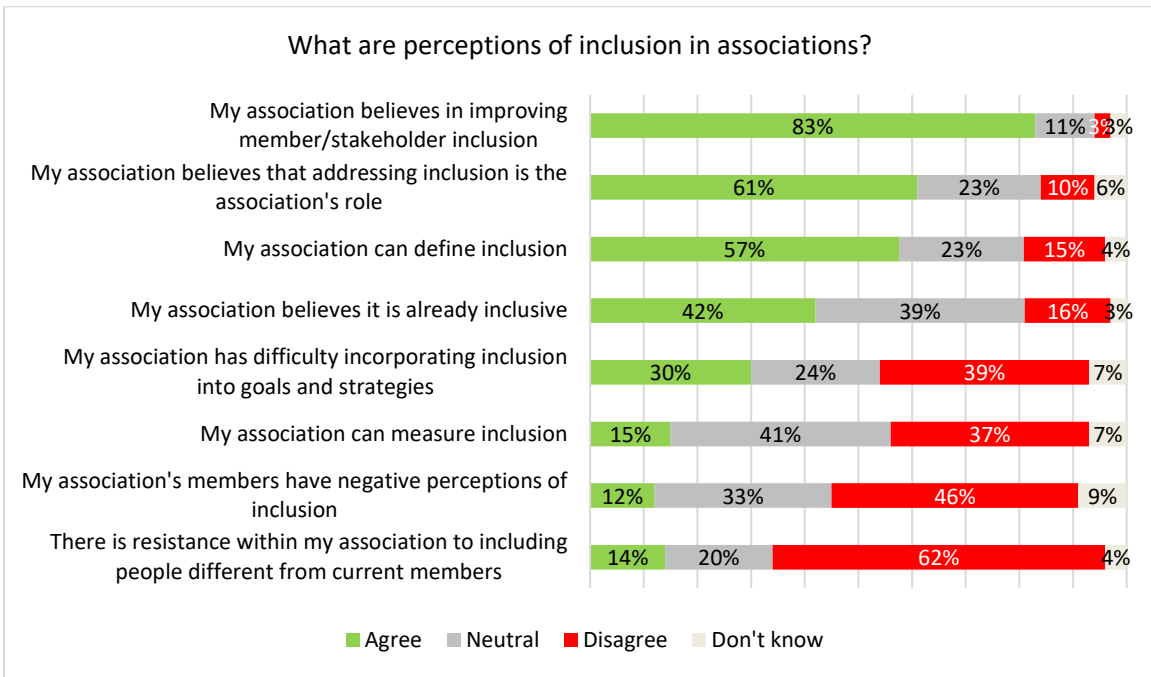


FIGURE 19 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI 2023

*Question text: How much do you agree with the following statements regarding **inclusion** at your association?*

Respondents strongly favor improving member or stakeholder inclusion (83% agree) and supported their association's role (61% agree). More than 6 out of 10 disagree that there is resistance to including people different from current members.

Inclusion Initiatives

The following highlights initiatives identified as inclusionary. **Association Laboratory suspects** that most associations look at “inclusion” as a means of making the door to participation with the association and its use as a platform for members’ success “wider and easier to open” for more people. Examples range from dietary options designed to include individuals with a range of dietary requirements to a review of content to ensure language is of the appropriate tone, context, and meaning.

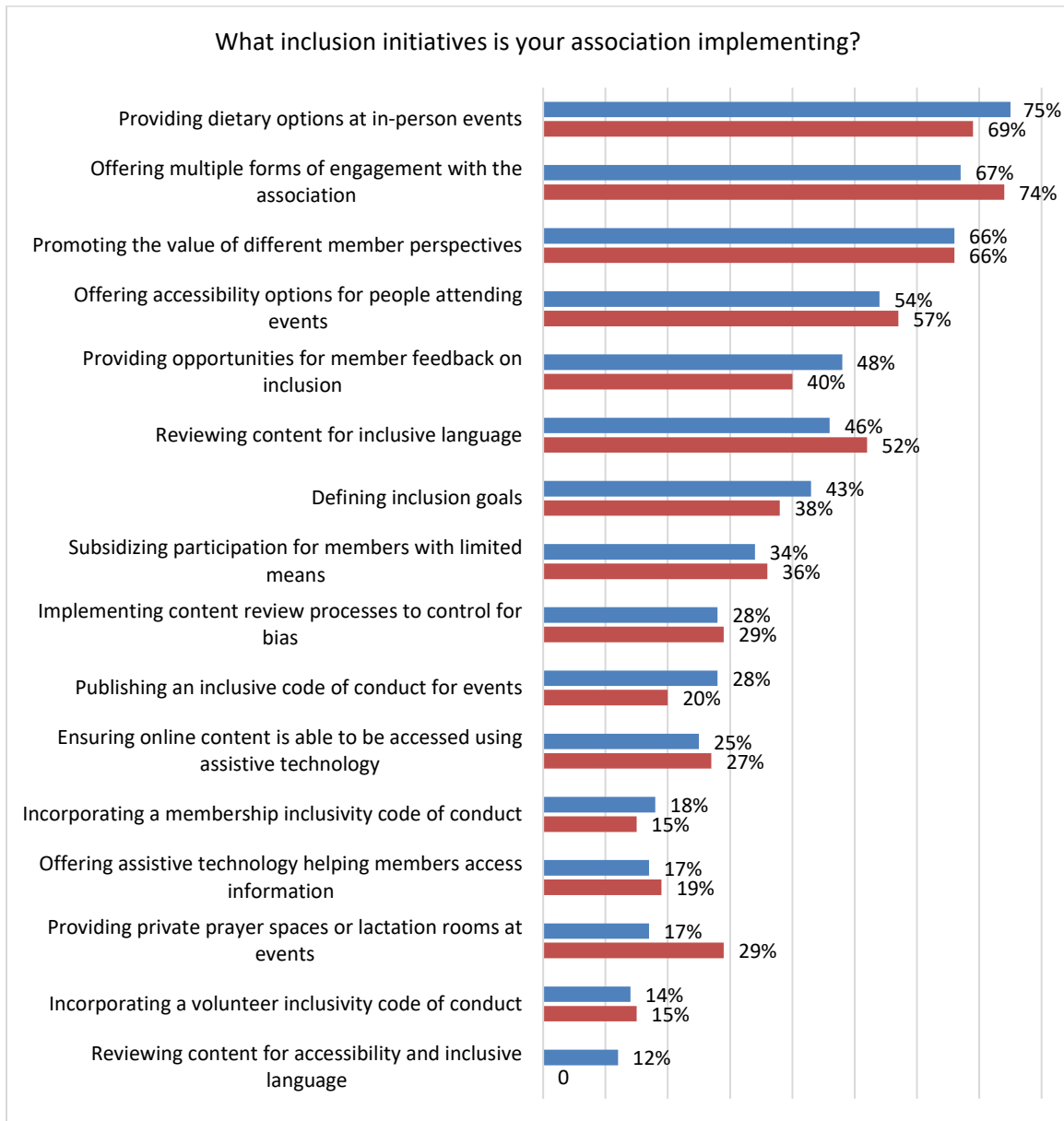


FIGURE 20 LOOKING FORWARD® DEI TRENDS

Question text: Which of the following **inclusion** initiatives is your association sustaining or implementing over the next year? Select all that apply.

Closing

Association Laboratory is the undisputed leader in sector research targeting the association industry and, specifically, the leading source of information on DEI concepts in associations. Despite this experience, grappling with these concepts continues to be challenging to research, discuss, and decide how best to incorporate these concepts into a modern association.

At Association Laboratory, we've been working with various organizations on DEI and other complex issues. Given our research in this area, here are some lessons we've learned.

First, the investigation and discussion of DEI can be incredibly controversial. This is a complicated issue without standard definitions, which makes conversation very difficult. In addition, individuals sometimes inadvertently and maliciously interpret key concepts for personal or organizational gain.

Second, the question differs from a positive concept like DEI and some negative alternatives. It is often between alternative positive viewpoints.

For example, the discussion of DEI by a surgical association was controversial because some leaders believed it conflicted with the traditional "colorblind" philosophy of medicine, that all patients, regardless of race, ethnicity, etc., deserved the same care. Once race (or other attributes) was introduced, it challenged this philosophy of colorblind treatment by introducing a qualifier.

Third, the devil is in the details of implementation. DEI policy statements are relatively benign and often generic. There are only so many ways to say it. The implementation of DEI is another matter. Do you change how you evaluate volunteer leaders based on their adherence to a subjective DEI assessment? Do you support segmenting the membership community by gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.? Disagreeing with these specific tactics while keeping a diverse and inclusive community is possible.

Fourth, many topics need to be clarified. DEI "Woke," "Systemic Racism," "Privilege," Implicit Bias, CRT, etc., are all very different concepts, but it is becoming nearly impossible to discuss one without others being introduced. This conflation of topics creates a challenging leadership environment.

Fifth, while DEI has been around a long time, it has become more controversial as some proponents of DEI have started to incorporate unrelated, more controversial components into the mix and to accuse anyone who disagrees as being hostile to diversity or implying bigotry (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). This effectively destroys discussion within your association.

At Association Laboratory, we have taken an agnostic viewpoint as researchers. Our job is to inform and facilitate the conversation, not take sides. We don't presume something exists or does not; we answer the questions as objectively as possible.

Appendix 1: Accessing the Looking Forward® Dashboard.

The Looking Forward® Dashboard is the leading source of research on the association sector. It contains the most recent, relevant, and customizable data to inform your decisions in a dynamic and uncertain environment.

Looking Forward® sector data is provided via a customizable dashboard, allowing you to focus on the segment of the association sector most critical to you, your staff, and the Board. See what issues impact members and identify your most likely challenges. Then, download the custom report to guide discussions with your team and volunteer leaders.

[Click here for the Looking Forward® Dashboard](#)

How to use the dashboard

The Looking Forward® Dashboard provides you with an overview of the sector studies conducted by Association Laboratory. It is a simplified representation of the data. It does not, for example, provide unique N counts (respondents/individual questions) for each question.

As you select an individual report, drill down into the data, and customize your report to your needs, only the most relevant data per question will be included. As a result of the different counting methodologies and the natural limitations of a published document requiring data counts at a particular time, there may be minor differences between printed documents and the Looking Forward® Dashboard.

Association Laboratory produces three sector studies under the Looking Forward® banner critical to association sector thought leadership.

- **Looking Forward® (Impact)** – This global environmental scan of the association strategy environment identifies the factors with the most significant impact on association members and the challenges these factors create for associations.
- **Looking Forward® (Solutions)** – This study assesses more than 135 different strategies that association leaders believe are important to success, given the influences on their members and the challenges these factors create.
- **Looking Forward® (DEI)** – This study, the first in the association sector, investigates sector perceptions of DEI issues, the challenges associations perceive in practical DEI work, and the strategies associations pursue to address these challenges.

The homepage of the data dashboard identifies the different sector data sets you can access from these three studies. Select the study of interest, and the dashboard will display top-level results. Clicking “Explore” in each chart will allow you to dig deeper into that topic area.

Each chart has a book icon in the bottom right corner, which allows you to see the questions asked of respondents.

In addition, once you click “Explore,” you will see a list of filters along the right side of the page. These filters allow you to adjust the data set by annual budget, member size, organization type, location, profession, and organization type (meaning professional or trade). At the bottom of each page, the printer graphic allows you to print a PDF of the page to use in conversations with your Board.

Appendix 2: Methodology

Looking Forward® DEI provides a picture of the current state of DEI in the association sector and the challenges and strategies considered most critical to trade and professional associations.

Association Laboratory developed and deployed an online survey to collect data from association leaders.

Response options for *Looking Forward® DEI* were informed by examining secondary research and client DEI studies incorporating quantitative and qualitative data.

A total of 178 individuals completed all or most of the survey. The response includes:

- 38% of respondents were classified as association Chief Staff Officers
- 6% of respondents were Volunteer Leaders.
- 5% of respondents were Assistant Executive Director/COO
- 18% of respondents were Senior Domain Executives (CFO, CMO, etc.)
- 29% of respondents were Association Staff Working in a Specific Domain Area
- 5% of respondents held a different job title

Appendix 3: About Association Laboratory

Association Laboratory helps association leaders make better decisions through research and strategy consulting services, dissemination of association sector research insights, and the education of association leaders.

The award-winning company is a national leader in developing sustainable, successful strategy for associations and has been advising associations since 1999 from offices in Washington, DC, and Chicago, IL. You can learn more about us at www.associationlaboratory.com.

Research and Strategy Consulting Services

Association Laboratory is a full-service research and strategy firm. We lead evidence-based, collaborative engagements addressing the spectrum of association challenges. From strategic planning and membership model design to online education and global expansion, the company helps you identify and implement successful business strategy.

Typical engagements include the following.

Strategic Planning	Membership Value Proposition and Modeling Strategy
Environmental Scanning	Online Education Strategy
Content Strategy	Component Value Proposition Strategy
Credentialing Strategy	Global Strategy
DEI Strategy	Emerging Leader Strategy

Association Sector Research and Insights

Association Laboratory collects and disseminates association sector research, aggregating information gathered from hundreds of association leaders, providing you with the most recent, relevant, and helpful information you need to guide conversations at your association.

Association Leader Education and Competency Development

Association Laboratory produces strategic educational content to help leaders develop the competencies necessary for success. Research-based and peer-driven, this content provides you with an engaging, effective means of improving the success of your leadership and decision-making.