E-IDEA

Furthering the transformation of our culture

From Left to Right: Claudia Flynn, Learning and Development Specialist, E-IDEA Teamwork Initiative (Part-time); Renée Pellissier, Program Lead, E-IDEA Teamwork Initiative; Nia Fernandez, E-IDEA Manager

Helping students face real-world challenges is at the forefront of the Faculty of Engineering. **Engineering Inclusivity, Diversity and Equity Advancement (E-IDEA)** is one of the Faculty's four key [Innovation by Design]() initiatives and aims to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) inside and outside the classroom.

Since its inception in 2016, E-IDEA has set out to encourage a culture of inclusivity throughout the engineering, architecture, and urban planning communities. E-IDEA seeks to address systemic barriers and build awareness of structures that prevent different groups from fully participating and thriving.

Dean Jim Nicell knew that E-IDEA needed a full-time leader to manage its growing mandate. This past spring, the Faculty hired **Nia Fernandez, Ph.D.** to give shape to E-IDEA's programs and expand its impact. Fernandez holds a Doctorate in Chemical Engineering from McGill.

You founded the student-led [Graduate Engineering Equity Committee (GEEC)]() in 2017, which was recognized by the [Preston Phipps Equity and Diversity Award]() and the McGill Award for Equity and Community Building in 2020.* What drives you? What is your goal in this new position?

I hold fairness, justice, compassion, and lifelong learning among my core values, so driving EDI in higher education came to be a natural fit. Also, although I wasn't conscious of this when I started GEEC, I've since discovered myself to be a strong strategic thinker. I see the gaps in the way we do things and I'm driven to develop practical strategies for filling those gaps in the short and long terms. GEEC, for example, was founded with the purpose of bringing awareness to the experiences of graduate students and postdocs—a population that tends to fall through the cracks when it comes to Faculty attention and resources. I couldn't be happier that GEEC is still actively growing and evolving!

In my new role as manager of E-IDEA, my overarching goal is to normalize EDI as an integral part of how we operate everywhere and anywhere in the Faculty. We need to embed EDI as firmly as we embed values like workplace safety and academic integrity—and in practical, sustainable ways that engage all members of our community.

What are some positive outcomes GEEC had on the graduate experience that you'd like to see across the Faculty?

One area where GEEC has excelled is in fostering collaboration and connectedness. All across McGill, we hear that people are struggling with how siloed they are. This affects E-IDEA as well. One of my goals is to build strong relationships between E-IDEA and other initiatives and student groups in the Faculty of Engineering so we can create a supportive network and use our resources more efficiently. Cultural change is a hefty undertaking with many layers to it, and it's important that we don't feel alone in that work and that we leverage our progress.

What do you see as your first priorities?

I'm currently assessing the objectives, progress, and impact of each of the programs already in place, putting together a strategic direction for E-IDEA. I will also be working closely with our new Associate Dean of Faculty Affairs, **Michael Kokkolaras**, and McGill's Equity Team to develop these plans.

There are several E-IDEA programs that are running smoothly with a clear positive impact on our community. Our [Teamwork Initiative](#) program, for example, partners with engineering and design instructors to help them build EDI content into course material, while developing interpersonal skills in the classroom. We currently work with instructors across all eight departments and schools of the Faculty. Our hurdle is that current demand exceeds the number of EDI educators we have available on the E-IDEA team!

Earlier this year, we launched the first *Projections* digital art exhibition in the McConnell Engineering Building. *Projections* was conceived to foster visibility and belonging by displaying artwork from underrepresented communities in one of the

highest-traffic spaces of our Faculty. Our first exhibition, *Projections: KWE*, was curated by the [Indigenous Inclusion Committee](#) and showcases 30 pieces by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists. It's been incredible to hear how meaningful this project is for Indigenous students, even those outside of the Faculty.

And the [EDI Advocacy](#) program, made up of trained staff volunteers, helps facilitate discussions about EDI and advocates for a more inclusive culture on a daily basis. That community has grown to 25 volunteers and we're unrolling some exciting changes over the next year! Currently, I'm also working on reviving the Faculty Equity Committee post-COVID and supporting Chairs and Directors in developing EDI action plans. Eventually, we want to involve research teams as well.

What do you see as an immediate need of the E-IDEA initiative?

The passion of the staff we have is palpable. And we've had a lot of positive reception. But we need more people who are working on this initiative full-time.

To really support students, we need a core team that is large enough to model inclusive practices and provide advising until EDI is second nature to instructors and researchers. Our goal is to grow our Community of Practice across several fronts, so we have robust, sustainable pathways for developing EDI fluency and applications in higher education and beyond.

What would you say is the biggest mindset change for those of us who want to see this change but aren't sure where to start?

One of the most common responses I've observed is that people feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the magnitude of change required, so they ultimately end up doing nothing. We need to appreciate that change is a collective effort and that we can all find ways to contribute. Of course, those of us in leadership positions have greater responsibility and accountability for organizational change.

What we do know is that the next generation of engineers, architects, and urban planners cares deeply about social justice and making a difference through their profession. It's important that we continue evolving so we can equip them with what they need to effect positive change in the world.

* See the [Q&A](#) where Fernandez shares their thoughts as GEEC's outgoing director and founder

GET INVOLVED

To move the E-IDEA initiative forward, your involvement is crucial. You can help by supporting the program. Email: ua-comms.engineering@mcgill.caTelephone: 514-398-2454 Mail: University Advancement, Faculty of Engineering, McConnell Engineering Bldg., Rm 744, 3480 University Street, Montreal QC, H3A 0E9, Canada. Your involvement is sincerely appreciated.