

Building Expertise on Diversity Education at Vanier College

As one of the most diverse colleges in the country, Vanier College takes pride in the range of nationalities, languages, and identities represented among our students. As a signatory to CICA's Indigenous Education Protocol, Vanier is also committed to affirming the importance of Indigenous education. However, rather than being a finalized accomplishment to hold up on a pedestal, this diversity pushes us to think about how educational institutions can be best equipped to educate and support the students who come to us.

Vanier faculty and staff have long been active in research and projects related to diversity education. In fact, this work has been so extensive that the college is moving forward with the creation of a centre of research and expertise on the topic, which will allow us to highlight and support both existing projects and the creation of new initiatives. In this article, I will look at how we can understand diversity education; some examples of the work already being done at Vanier; and some of the next steps and considerations to keep in mind as plans for the centre develop.

What is diversity education?

Although "diversity" is sometimes understood mainly in ethnic or cultural terms, the diversity education work at Vanier generally takes a broader definition of diversity, looking at ethnocultural background, gender, language, sexuality, gender identity, religion, disability, class, and age, among other characteristics. As we look at all of those forms of diversity, there are many questions we can ask, including:

How do different forms of diversity intersect?

People's experiences and identities cannot be compartmentalized: someone is not a woman in some moments, and Indigenous in others, for example. The pieces of our identities do not simply add themselves to each other; rather, they interact with each other and influence each other. As many people reading this will be aware, Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to refer to the ways that forms of discrimination based on categories like race and gender work together and reinforce each other. As educators, it behoves us to ask ourselves, what does intersectionality look like in the lives of our students?

Who do we imagine as the "default" student, and who is excluded from this image?

Do we assume a "typical" student to be someone who is around 18 years old and living at home with parents who support them financially? Do we assume them to be born in Canada and to speak English or French as a first language? Do we assume that reading a certain number of pages for homework will only take a short time? If

we talk in conversation about a typical student, are they more likely to be named "Jimmy" or "Johnny" than "Emilio," "Fatima," or "Rebecca"?

If so, what are we missing? It's true that certain experiences or backgrounds may be more common than others, and there's nothing wrong with that; the problem is what happens when students don't feel that we are ever taking their backgrounds or experiences into account, and when our words or actions implicitly exclude certain students over and over.

What barriers might students be facing?

At Vanier, we often talk about the diversity of our student body as a strength. This is true! However, if we are not as aware as we could be about the diverse experiences of our students, there may be barriers that have a disproportionate impact on some of our students. Students who speak English as a third or fourth language may be unfamiliar with certain figures of speech used in class. Students who are non-binary may face barriers to their physical education classes because of the gendered changerooms. Students with dyslexia may struggle to read PowerPoint slides that are cluttered or have insufficient contrast in colours. How can a greater attention to diversity help reduce some of these barriers?

What is the "education" piece of "diversity education"?

Having looked at what "diversity" means, let's look at the "education" side. Research and pedagogical projects aimed at diversity education might look at one or more of the following areas and prompt us to pose the following questions:

- **Course content:** what is the "canon" in particular fields? Whose voices are left out? How might all disciplines be enriched by ensuring a wider diversity of topics covered and authors read?
- **Pedagogy/teaching styles:** how can teaching styles be adapted in order to be accessible to students with a wide range of possible disabilities, language levels, and cultural points of reference? How can Indigenous pedagogies be incorporated into more disciplines?
- **Institutional policies:** are there policies around admission or assessment that might create disproportionate barriers for certain students? What considerations need to be kept in mind in order to ensure that policies don't impose a greater burden on some students than on others?
- **Services for students:** what does it look like for academic institutions to offer services (financial, psychological, disability-related,

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and others) that are culturally relevant, that respond to the needs of our students, and that are available at times that our students can access them?

- **Campus climate:** what does it mean for a campus to be safe and accessible to students, both physically (such as the presence of ramps and elevators) and in other ways (for example, options for washrooms that affirm people’s gender identities)? How do we assess whether our campus climate affirms all students?
- **Representation:** what impact does representation of backgrounds and identities among faculty, staff, and administration have for students?

Who is already working on diversity education at Vanier?

Below is a non-exhaustive sample of some of the research on diversity education that Vanier faculty and staff have undertaken as part of their work at the college:

- The Critical Diversity in Higher Education working group organized a conference in 2017 looking at zones of “discomfort” when talking about issues around race, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and language.
- Humanities teacher Leila Bdeir and I are collaborating on a project that examines the experiences of Muslim college students in Quebec.
- French teacher Philippe Gagné’s work investigates “twinning” programs as a way of building connections across cultural and linguistic differences.
- Anthropology teacher Jacky Vallée has created an Indigenous Studies Certificate Program at the college as well as trainings and pedagogical materials for teachers wanting to incorporate Indigenous pedagogies into their work.
- French teacher Danielle Altidor worked with her students to publish a book about experiences of racism.
- Sociology teacher Sophia Grabowiecka’s research examines students’ experiences of diversity and belonging on campus.
- Humanities teacher Kim Matthews has studied the development of intercultural competence among students and is currently working on questions of food security.
- French teacher Katri Suhonen is working on research looking at feelings of inclusion and exclusion among allophone students in French classes.
- English teacher Maria Chiras, whose doctoral research focuses on discourses about allophone students, has prepared a report and strategic plan for a diversity education centre at Vanier.
- Year-long task forces of teachers representing a wide range of

programs have examined how to implement Universal Design for Learning in the Vanier context and have conducted research about accessibility barriers that students face.

What’s next for diversity education at Vanier?

For the last few years, Vanier has been moving towards the creation of a centre of research and expertise on diversity education, which will bring together some of the existing work in this area and offer support and resources to further enhance such work. Among the anticipated outputs of this centre will be both scholarly publications and hands-on tools that other educators can use in supporting their students, revisiting course content, and contributing to a campus climate that affirms the diversity of its community members.

One element that has arisen recently as a key component of this work is that of community care. The work of engaging with themes around social justice and systemic oppression can be draining, and it is important to think about what collective care can look like among people doing this work. A recent workshop facilitated by Humanities teacher and community organizer Rushdia Mehreen raised questions about how Vanier faculty and staff can better support ourselves and each other in some of the work that we do. The workshop opened up discussions and ideas that we will be following up on in the future. My intention is to weave some of these ideas into the centre of diversity education from the outset as a way of opening up new possibilities for how to think about the research process and the people involved in it.

In her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed writes that “we need to keep asking what we are doing with diversity. If diversity is to remain a question, it is not one that can be solved” (p. 17). Throughout her study, Ahmed cautions against seeing diversity as a *fait accompli* or as a public relations exercise. Instead, she argues that the real work often comes through critical reflection about ourselves, our institutions, and the world in which we live. As we move forward in looking at diversity education at Vanier, it is important to continue to commit to asking hard questions and not shying away from the difficult and often uncomfortable work of addressing racism and other systemic forms of oppression.



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