How Can Graduate Instructors Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Their Courses?

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

In this chapter, readers will find

- Strategies to include Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion practices when designing the course syllabus.

- Considerations for fostering equity among students through the format and scoring of course assessments.

- Methods to include diverse cultures and contexts in course materials to increase representation.

- Strategies for promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in various components of a course by graduate instructors who have different levels of course autonomy.

There is significant enthusiasm for fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across higher education institutions (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Klonoski et al., 2018). However, approaches for implementing these practices in individual courses are not always focused on graduate instructors. In this chapter, we seek to provide tangible strategies for graduate instructors to promote DEI in their courses while acknowledging the challenges that graduate students may encounter. First, we will consider the way that the course is structured. This will include methods to promote equitable practices while designing the course. Next, we will discuss the way in which the course is presented. This portion of the chapter will focus on equitable practices during the course, such as the content that is being presented, course delivery, and how the course material is discussed. Third, we will discuss various methods that graduate instructors may consider to engage students with

course content, for example, including in-class activities that are completed individually or in groups using varying formats. The final section of the chapter will acknowledge some potential challenges to incorporating equitable practices in a course. Ideally, we hope to develop courses which provide opportunities for all our students to succeed.

EQUITABLE PRACTICES

What are some practices that graduate instructors can engage in to foster DEI in their courses? Based on our academic experiences, it was not often made explicit how equity or inclusion would be promoted in the course. In our own teaching endeavors, we have worked with students from diverse backgrounds. This includes students of different race and ethnicities, belonging to varying socio-economic backgrounds, first-generation college students, and non-traditional college students. Collectively, these experiences have made us notice a need to facilitate a more equitable course climate. Therefore, in this section, we will explore potential strategies that can be used when developing the (i) syllabus and (ii) assessments for the course.

Syllabus

Regardless of the course you teach, the first day typically involves going over the syllabus with the class. The syllabus is, often, the first point of contact between instructors and students. It contains course-specific information (e.g., format of the course, assessment information, etc.) and reflects the instructor's pedagogical approach (Ching, 2018; Parkes & Harris, 2002). Many instructors include a diversity statement in their syllabus, a statement that contains information related to diversity and social justice issues (Fuentes et al., 2021). This may include a separate preferred name and pronoun statement as well as family-friendly policies that acknowledges various family-related commitments that students may have. For example, instructors can consider giving parents the flexibility of bringing their child to class if they are not able to find childcare and request for non-parents in the class to leave the seats closest to the doors for parents (Fuentes et al., 2021). This may be especially important for students who seek to balance the demands of family and academic commitments successfully (Beeler, 2016; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Sy & Romero, 2008). While this is useful for instructors to make their implicit intentions and values explicit, these diversity statements may be limited in their effectiveness if they are not discussed with students. Below, we discuss two ways that graduate instructors can use the syllabus as an effective tool to promote DEI.

First, it would be useful to highlight the diversity statement(s) in the document when discussing the syllabus on the first day of class. When students receive the syllabus, the first sections they turn to are typically the sections on course assessments and grading policy. More often than not, students are likely to skim over the section on course policies, especially when the syllabus is long. To navigate this issue, graduate instructors can go over these sections when they discuss the syllabus. Actively discussing these statements with students creates greater awareness of the ways that instructors are attempting to promote DEI in the course. Below are two sample course diversity statements. Dr. Alisse Portnoy from the University of Michigan included the following statement in an Introductory-level English class:

> In our structured and unstructured discussions and dialogues, we also will have many opportunities to explore some challenging issues and increase our understandings of different perspectives. Our conversations may not always be easy; we sometimes will make mistakes in our speaking and our

listening; sometimes we will need patience or courage or imagination or any number of qualities in combination to engage our texts, our classmates, and our own ideas and experiences. Always we will need respect for others. Thus, an additional aim of our course necessarily will be for us to increase our facility with the sometimes difficult conversations that arise as we deepen our understandings of multiple perspectives – whatever our backgrounds, experiences, or positions (Portnoy, 2014).

The College of Education at the University of Iowa recommend this second statement:

Respect for Diversity: It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups. In addition, if any of our class meetings conflict with your religious events, please let me know so that we can make arrangements for you. (University of Iowa College of Education, 2021, "Syllabus Checklist" section).

However, because these points are developed by the instructor, the various DEI statements may not resonate with students. To help students feel more included, instructors can consider developing the course DEI statement as a community building activity. To do this, instructors and students can work together on the first day of class to brainstorm ideas for the DEI statement. For example, to begin the discussion, instructors may first acknowledge that everyone in the classroom has several socio-cultural identities and then express their commitment to minimize systematic forces of oppression throughout the semester (Fuentes et al., 2021). After which, students will be asked to list down strategies that they think can promote DEI in the course. All responses will be kept anonymous. Once everyone has responded, a large group discussion will be held and students can vote on the top five strategies they would like to include in the statement. Sample questions that can be asked to students to facilitate the discussion include, "Describe the classroom environment that you would feel comfortable to learn in?" and "How can we create and maintain a classroom space where differences are respected and valued?". As instructors, we appreciate hearing our students' perspectives through this process. From the student's perspective, when they feel that their voices are heard, they may be more willing to participate in class and share unique viewpoints with their peers during the course (Cunninghame et al., 2020). Throughout the semester, it may be useful to refer back to the statement depending on the climate of the course and to make revisions, if needed.

Second, in addition to including a diversity statement in the syllabus, graduate instructors can consider including a preferred name and pronoun statement. Class rosters and university data systems are provided to faculty with the student's legal name and, sometimes, with the legal gender marker (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Linley & Kilgo, 2018). Although some universities may allow students to change the way that they would want their preferred or proper name to appear in the class roster, this may not be the case across all institutions. As instructors, we try our best to remember our students' names knowing that this makes them feel welcomed and included in the course. For our classes, we ask students to complete a welcome sheet or index card on the first day of class to indicate their preferred names and pronouns while introducing themselves. However, because not all students may feel comfortable disclosing their pronouns (MacNamara et al., 2017; Poor-Pariseau, 2021), it is useful to make this portion of the activity optional rather than mandatory. Having this information makes us feel more confident interacting with students, especially when our courses include a diverse

group of students (e.g., students who abbreviate their first name, students who decide to use their middle name, students who prefer or identify with names other than their given legal names, and nonbinary or transgender students who identity with a different name).

Course Assessments

Regardless of the course taught, students in class have varying learning abilities and styles. The course assessments should not only be developed with the goal of achieving the course objectives but also of promoting DEI among students within the course. We will present several strategies that we have used based on our experiences as graduate instructors.

One strategy we recommend is to ensure that the weighting of the course assignments is as even as possible. Exams and quizzes are the most common assessment formats used (Parkes et al., 2003); however, students from marginalized groups may struggle with these approaches (Chung et al., 2010 Lin et al., 1998; Wei & Liao, 2011). If exams and quizzes have the highest weighting in the course, this may place marginalized students at a greater disadvantage compared to their peers. To promote equity, instructors can plan the course so that the total points associated with exams make up less than 50% of the course grade. For example, we may include three non-cumulative exams in a course and supplement the exams with assignments, quizzes, and in-class activities. Having more in-class activities and low-stake quizzes that are worth more points are useful in alleviating feelings of test anxiety that students may have with heavily-weighted exams (Salehi et al., 2019; Zeidner, 2007).

A second strategy, if the nature of the course allows for this, is to include different types of assessment questions within the exam. One method we have used is to have a mixture of multiple-choice questions and short-answer questions (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012; Stowell, 2004). In some cases, when students have the option to select several short-answer questions to respond to, this allows them to drop the questions that they feel less confident in attempting.

While incorporating different types of assessment questions is useful for promoting equity and inclusion among students, we acknowledge the potential limitations that graduate instructors may encounter when using question formats that do not allow for automated scoring. For example, courses that graduate instructors teach are often lower-level introductory or general education courses that have a large student enrollment size such as Introduction to Psychology, General Chemistry, and Fundamentals of Mathematics (Mutambuki & Schwartx, 2018; Shortlidge & Eddy, 2018; Tilley, 2014). Thus, including different types of assessment questions may be challenging or even unrealistic for graduate instructors to implement because of the amount of grading involved and the time taken to grade the exams. If graduate instructors are required to include exams and automated scoring methods are used, these exams can be supplemented with alternative assessments. For example, group activities or projects would minimize the number of individual assignments to grade. Additionally, some students may be more successful with group papers or projects as they can complete these assignments over a period of time compared to high-stakes exams.

Finally, giving students the opportunity to drop their lowest quiz or assignment score may be a helpful assessment strategy. There are times where students may miss a quiz or assignment either because they forgot to complete it or experienced a personal difficulty. Although some students may

contact their instructor to express their concerns and ask for an extension, not all students who are experiencing similar issues may feel comfortable doing so. Allowing students to drop their lowest quiz or assignment score also reduces the stakes associated with each assessment and may alleviate feelings of stress. Therefore, this strategy may help to promote equity among all students in the course.

EQUITABLE DELIVERY OF COURSE INFORMATION

Next, we will discuss the way that the course is presented. This portion of the chapter will focus on equitable practices during the course, such as the content that is being presented, course delivery, and the way that the course material is discussed.

Discussion of course content

First, when discussing theories and key concepts, it is important to include content that is representative of diverse cultures and contexts. Though this may be more readily applicable to the social sciences and humanities, simple strategies such as acknowledging the lack of representation or using data from diverse populations can be implemented in STEM courses.

In many fields of study, the foundational content that is taught to students is not inclusive. Research is often conducted by and focused on specific demographics (e.g., male, White scholars) (Henrich et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2020; Scharff et al., 2010). A quick search of "founders" of most fields of study emphasizes this issue. For example, in psychology, the introductory theoretical frameworks examining attachment are exclusively by white scholars that include majority white samples (Bretherton, 1992; Schneider, 1991). Thus, it is the norm that articles and textbooks discussing the development of attachment theory present a limited interpretation of the construct. In such cases, instructors can first acknowledge the considerable underrepresentation and then perhaps present the issue within a historical context. Additionally, this can be a learning opportunity for students to consider potential ramifications and why this lack of representation might be occurring.

Historically, there has been a gender disparity in STEM fields. Instructors can incorporate the historical context for this persistent issue when discussing relevant content. For example, if the course material involves a lecture on deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), the instructor can highlight that chemist Rosalind Franklin made significant contributions to the discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA; however, it was Maurice Wilkins, Francis Crick and James Watson who received complete credit and were awarded a Nobel Prize (Maddox, 2003). Instructors can cite that the lack of representation is likely a result of systemic inequities in the field, which results in certain researchers and groups being silenced and not included. Relevant examples would highlight that researchers from underrepresented groups may not have had the same opportunities for their contributions to be acknowledged. Therefore, theoretical frameworks from different perspectives specifically from individuals who have been historically underrepresented in the discipline must be incorporated. The customary theories could be supplemented with literature conducted by scholars of color and/ or with a diverse sample. Highlighting the work of scholars from underrepresented groups allows this exposure to students with shared identities. Researchers have demonstrated that representation within a domain is more likely to encourage students to pursue similar studies and careers in the field (Davis, 2008; Martin & Fisher-Ari, 2021; Rainey et al., 2018).

Increased representation encourages students to explore the limitations of generalizability when

people of similar demographics (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) are included. Instructors can be intentional about discussing the concerns of applying findings from a restricted sample across racial groups, gender, or cultures. For example, subsequent attachment studies demonstrated that initial findings and interpretations of patterns of classifications were not always transferable to countries such as Israel and Japan (Van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). Additionally, lack of representation in clinical research has detrimental consequences to health outcomes. It was found that only 5% of the genetic markers associated with asthma in white Americans applied to African Americans (White et al., 2016). Thus, differences in response to medications that are developed based on white Americans in clinical trials may not be as effective for African American children. Providing relevant real-world examples allows for critical thinking opportunities on the significance of inclusion and equity within the field.

Some fields may intrinsically consider DEI content (e.g., sociology, cultural anthropology); however, other domains may not. Thus, it may be more challenging to incorporate DEI content in courses such as statistics or research methods. One strategy is to include case studies or data that are inclusive and a representation of various demographics (e.g., race, gender identity, political affiliation, religion, etc.). Examples of where to access diverse datasets include, The National Science Foundation's National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (https://ncses.nsf.gov), Pew Research Center (https://www.pewresearch.org), and the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov). However, this requires an awareness to not reproduce a token marginalized perspective. For example, instead of only including data of undocumented people with a sole focus on the Mexico-United States border, information on undocumented individuals from Canada or European countries could also be included (Fong & Chan, 2008; McCorkle, 2018). Additionally, referencing Asian countries or "Eastern culture" and only using outcomes reported from China does not consider the vast cultural differences across the continent. Thus, instructors across domains should be mindful and intentional about the types of data that are used in their courses.

When instructors present diverse materials or content that includes traditionally marginalized groups in their courses, it is important to also provide an explicit rationale for the inclusion of the materials. Though this is useful for all instructors, it is particularly necessary for instructors who belong to dominant identity groups to provide a context and a clear indication of why they are presenting specific materials to avoid examples of appropriation or further tokenization. Furthermore, students may not feel empowered to voice concerns over problematic examples that are shared due to perceived instructor-student dynamics. By having greater awareness of these issues, this can help to minimize harm especially to students who are part of traditionally marginalized groups. We hope instructors challenge dominant narratives and diversify knowledge through acquiring a more thorough understanding of course content.

Presentation of Course Content

The aim is for course materials to include images, videos, and examples that reflect diverse representations. When designing course slides and resources, instructors can incorporate content from various cultures and contexts (e.g., pictures, names in examples). This assists with learning and retention as students may find it easier to connect with the content (Raynaudo & Peralta, 2019). For example, when developing or reviewing course materials, instructors can evaluate the identities of people in presentations and how they are being depicted (e.g., only people of color in

presentation when discussing poverty). Using examples during class to reinforce the course can be an accessible learning tool. However, it is important to consider the messages the examples may send to students (e.g., equating Arab or Middle Eastern heritage to being Muslim, Asian students as being good at math, men preferring STEM professions, etc.), which can unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes or continue to perpetuate problematic narratives. In content videos or other visual elements, the speakers and experts could include individuals from various backgrounds and/or provide different perspectives. Additionally, displaying cultural practices or experiences across different contexts demonstrates that although certain practices may be common and beneficial in one context, they may not necessarily be useful or present in another. Offering varying perspectives allows students to critically think about the false universality of a dominant culture.

The goal is to have the classroom be a supportive and welcoming environment for all students. It is well documented that students' social and academic outcomes significantly improve when there is a sense of belonging to the campus community (Fuentes et al., 2021; Museus et al., 2017; Rainey et al., 2018). Increasing diverse representation and providing diverse perspectives in the course allow students to feel valued, which, then, facilitates engagement and improves performance (Cheryan et al., 2017; Maruyama et al., 2000).

COURSE DELIVERY

Graduate instructors may consider a number of methods for students to engage with course content. It is the responsibility of the instructor to establish and facilitate an encouraging and inclusive environment where students can succeed. There are several methods that might encourage engagement with course content. First, for courses where lectures are the primary mode of instruction, lectures can be supplemented with small group discussions and interactive in-class assignments. From our experience, students consistently report positive evaluations of in-class activities. These activities are typically completed in groups consisting of varying formats (e.g., response to a prompt or video, example quiz questions based on content in lecture, etc.). Benefits of this approach are that students are able to engage with one another and receive an immediate self-assessment of course materials. Additionally, this allows for structured time for students to reflect on the material and report back to the larger class. The in-class activities also provide the instructor with feedback on content that students have found challenging and that may need to be reviewed.

Second, some students may have difficulty focusing when one same mode of instruction is used for the entire class period. Thus, having different instruction modes may help students sustain their attention, refocus, and ultimately retain more information (Barr, 2014; McCarty et al., 2016). Graduate instructors may consider implementing a flexible class structure—that is, there are components of the class that are the same every session while others vary from day to day, depending on course goals. For example, each class session can start with three learning objectives and a dedicated portion to lecture. However, other components of class can differ by day or week (e.g., dedicated time for group activities every two class sessions). This provides consistency, so that students know what to expect, but modifications to the class format help sustain engagement (Heilporn et al., 2021). Additionally, when possible, graduate instructors can implement community building activities (e.g., 10 minutes during the first class session of the week). During these activities, students will first connect with one another while completing an activity and then report back to the class. Simple activities that are not time consuming may set the tone for the class by increasing

student comfort level. As a result, students may be more inclined to ask clarifying questions or willing to share a comment and provide responses during the lecture or discussion if they have engaged in community building activities. Thus, adjusting teaching methods may be a beneficial practice to implement equitable delivery of course content.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING DEI IN COURSES

The primary objective of this chapter is to provide graduate instructors with strategies to implement DEI in their courses. We hope that the chapter can encourage graduate instructors to consider DEI in several ways, not only during course discussion of identities and demographics. However, we do recognize that because graduate instructors will encounter varying levels of independence when developing and implementing a course, some of these strategies may be challenging to use. Below, we discuss the ways that DEI can be promoted by graduate students who have different levels of autonomy in developing the courses they teach.

First, those who are directed to follow predetermined procedures and use established course materials may have limited opportunity for significant changes to curriculum. Graduate instructors may have varying levels of experience or comfort and thus may feel apprehensive in facilitating discussing DEI topics in courses. Alternatively, they may fear repercussions for introducing particular issues if those issues are not deemed appropriate as part of the course or the department goals (Alvarez McHatton et al., 2009). In these cases, graduate instructors can focus on using thoughtful and representative examples, consider course delivery, and establish a welcoming environment via statements in the syllabus or discussed at the beginning of the course. Though topics of diversity and equity may not be explicitly discussed, these practices can facilitate an environment where more students feel supported and welcomed.

There are also graduate students who have the ability to create their own classes with significant autonomy. This allows the instructor to curate an equitable course that considers course policies, assessment scoring, the addition of representative content, and teaching practices. Graduate instructors can obtain recommendations from students such as providing opportunities for anonymous feedback via surveys. For example, in our courses we have asked students, "What has been going well for you this semester?", "What has been challenging for you this semester?", "As the instructor, what could I be doing to improve the class to help you learn?" and "What could you be doing to improve your experience in the class?". Students are also asked to add any other information that they feel comfortable sharing to facilitate engagement and learning. The anonymity gives students the opportunity to honestly share their experience in the course without fear of repercussion. Alternatively, feedback can be obtained indirectly through assessing the classroom climate. This includes the levels of student engagement, liveliness of discussion, students' openness to learning and/or discussing different perspectives, students' feelings of their backgrounds and/or identities being valued, and the levels of collaboration and support within the peer environment. Through these experiences, graduate instructors may be more equipped to identify course inequities and present potential suggestions to foster an inclusive environment that can be shared with other graduate students and faculty members within the department.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As graduate instructors who aspire to become full time faculty, we have taken advantage of our early teaching opportunities to cultivate who we want to be as teachers. This is not limited to the content of the course, but it is equally important to consider how to create a space where all students have the opportunity to feel included and be successful. Part of this desire comes from our journeys as students of color where our identities and experiences have not always been included in course content. Throughout our undergraduate experience, we had grown accustomed to not seeing the work of scholars with shared identities or limited representation in samples being generalized to a greater population. As a result, it has become our priority, as graduate instructors, to develop strategies that increase representation in our own courses.

Additionally, we also recognize that many long-lasting policies often go unnoticed by the individuals who developed them. Because we may have also experienced these course inequities throughout our academic journeys, we can work with the department to identify and address these issues. Thus, it would be beneficial to reconsider the course practices and policies that are often implemented and to consider modifications, where necessary, to promote equity and inclusion. We hope to continue developing and implementing these strategies to create spaces where current and future students can thrive.

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