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**Bridging Perspectives: How policy makers and classroom instructors  
can collaborate for a more equitable and inclusive classroom**

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion are in the current spotlight in education as instructors work to support the success of all students who show up to learn. In an increasingly diverse society, this means that the instructor and the students may have quite different backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and ways of knowing. Institutional workshops that train instructors to respond to this complex learning environment recommend a variety of approaches including educating students to recognize the structures of inequity, fostering an environment of equity and inclusion, improving key student experiences, embracing the experiences of minoritized students, and supporting student mental health. Thoman et al. (2021) identify “four key inputs that help explain faculty’s decision to implement (or not) an evidence-based intervention: 1) notice that underrepresentation is a problem, 2) interpret underrepresentation as needing immediate action, 3) assume responsibility, and 4) know how to help” (p.2). The first three steps are supported by institutional and departmental initiatives helping instructors to recognize the systemic issues that surround the classroom. These general recommendations are sensible approaches to increasing equity and inclusion in the classroom, but how do instructors implement these recommendations in step 4 and what kind of effort do these recommendations require of an instructor?

*The Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching* put out a call for college classroom instructors to share personal narratives of how they implemented the call to create equity and inclusion in the classroom. Thirty-six instructors answered the call from across the United States and Canada. In these very personal narratives, instructors discussed their strong desire to support students in their courses and connect with them to create a supportive classroom community. In every case, the instructor expended significant effort to adapt the course content, structure, and practice to embrace student perspectives, individual skills, and individual experiences. This focus on student belonging and agency seems to be at the core of instructors’ realization of equity and inclusion at the classroom’s personal level. The instructors who discuss their choices in this issue narrate their personal progression through these steps, describing their decisions to implement interventions.

Biondi (2021) summarizes the basic classroom strategies to cultivate equity and inclusion: “[we can practice a] compassionate attitude, implicit feedback, and empathetic grading to help students succeed. We can tailor our course materials and supplementary resources to help students feel included and represented in the curriculum” (p. 35). At the ground level of the classroom, these are practical recommendations. At a more abstract level, promoting equity and inclusion means looking at the systemic allowances of being in the institution. Fosslien and Duffy (2019) characterize this more institutional perspective, writing, “Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice heard” (p. 185). The classroom instructor does not often directly work with students to get a seat at the table since influencing the class roster has already taken place by the time the class starts. However, the classroom instructor can work towards finding ways to give students a voice in the class and making sure their voices are heard. Part of this effort begins with the class structure and who the instructor is. Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen (2021) suggest that this effort begins with the syllabus including flexible due dates, acknowledging the intersectionality of the instructor, and being explicit about course expectations.

Goering et al. (2022) assert, “When faculty members use inclusive teaching practices, they teach with awareness of how systemic inequities affect our students’ and our own experiences of learning spaces: they develop self-awareness and understand privilege to reduce implicit bias” (78). We see this very process in this collection of personal narratives. The narratives show how instructors focus primarily on making personal connections with their students, giving students agency in how they learn, and accommodating their struggles to participate in institutional expectations of performance and attendance. These personal responses to institutional missions of diversity, equity, and inclusion are important for faculty developers and administrators to read to become familiar with the personal classroom experiences of instructors trying to realize the institution’s mission. Thoman et al. (2021, p.3) identify skepticism, diffusion of responsibility, a perception of lack of resources to act, and the time taken from course content as reasons to not take action to address inclusion activities. These narratives can inform ways to approach these problems of resistance as these instructors present what are essentially personal case studies of how to negotiate these problems. However, while Biondi (2021) asserts that, “creating this sense of comfort, acceptance, and belonging for students in turn yields the benefit of increasing the likelihood of student retention and fortifying our programs” (41), that outcome is less clear. Assessing the outcomes of these classroom level efforts can be challenging.

Thirty-six manuscripts were submitted from twenty-six disciplines. Authors wrote from eighteen states and one province across North America. Demographic information about the authors was not indicated. Narratives included the equity and inclusion problem identified by the author(s), their effort to address the problem, and their assessment of the effect of their efforts. The most often cited focus indicated in the narratives is strategies to address inclusion and belonging. Following that, the authors indicate they addressed issues of student agency, choice, and accountability. In addition, they mention addressing stereotype bias, engagement, and student identity. Finally, authors mentioned addressing transparent assessments, alternative perspectives, and accessibility. Student populations included graduate and undergraduate students.

In the text of the narratives, common problems included students not feeling like they belonged either in the classroom or in the discipline and a feeling of lack of agency in participating in the class. These instructors also expressed a desire to work with students concerning the logistics of dealing with college course expectations. The most prominent solution offered in every one of the narratives was an explicit focus on the student experience of the course. All other actions these instructors took hinged on the direct experience of the specific students in the course. There was a strong consensus that student-centered instruction was the main response to increasing equity and inclusion in their courses. Specific strategies included flexible course policies, multiple ways to engage in and respond to course content, personal check-ins, and including a diversity of representation in course content. A principal challenge of these narratives was knowing if the instructor's efforts were working to help students feel more included and in control of their learning.

In looking at these approaches to increasing equity and inclusion in the classroom, these responses may look like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices. The main considerations of UDL recommend multiple means of expression and engagement and multiple kinds of materials and representation in those materials. Goering et al. (2022) observe the importance of, "...building a sense of belonging, supporting classroom conversations on diversity, incorporating diverse perspectives into curricula, and broadening the participation and success of all students" (p. 77). It is interesting to consider how these narratives seem to support UDL as a practical way to frame addressing equity and inclusion at the classroom level.

There may sometimes be a disconnect between what happens in the classroom and what happens at upper administrative levels in education. There are several lessons that DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) policymakers can learn from the practical complexities students and instructors experience in the classroom on a daily basis. The narratives in this issue outline many of these practical complexities.

These policymakers are people in administrative positions who have responsibility and financial means to set organizational priorities and practices to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. DEI policymakers are well versed in the many systemic inequities that exist in education such as outright exclusion and separate but unequal policies that advance some while harming others. The initial wound of these issues may be historic, but the painful impacts are still being felt in education today. While addressing these structural and systemic “iceberg” issues is important, it may miss the mark on supporting the work that instructors in the classroom do to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). The 10,000-foot orbital view should inform instructors’ zoomed-in granular view of what is needed in individual classrooms, working on individual lessons or activities to move the needle forward on creating equity-minded, justice-seeking, well-informed students.

Policymakers and classroom instructors must collaborate on what is needed to promote and advance DEIB at an institution. The orbital view that policymakers have might be too abstract or distant for classroom teachers to relate to in the context of what to do in their classes. One of the most challenging issues instructors face is having the support and resources to assess the effectiveness of their DEIB interventions. Policymakers and classroom instructors can work together to plan, design, and implement research studies to move from theoretical concepts of DEIB to practical knowledge on how interventions impact the learning and lives of students. Good teaching practices become inclusive when the instructor meets students where they are and supports them as they move towards their educational goals, and DEI researchers can point out where the potential hazards are. Instructors can use this research to select better teaching strategies or provide a clearer rationale for why the course outcomes, activities and assessments are designed as they are.

An interesting point of these narratives is how challenging it was to point to specific assessments that indicated the success or effectiveness of their strategies to address equity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice. Often the perception of the instructor is that the classroom atmosphere is more positive, students are more engaged, or students spontaneously comment that they had positive feelings about the class. Some instructors had surveys or course performance measurements showing higher rates of course performance. However, it remains unclear how the students perceived the changes in the course or if minoritized students could transfer the feeling of belonging in the class to their more general academic experience at the institution. DEI policy makers could assist classroom teachers by helping them identify

assessment tools to find out if the work they are doing is supporting students in the way they envision to feel included and to have sufficient support to be successful in a given class.

The classroom instructors do what they can in their discipline to chip away at these challenges in the context of the daily work of learning in the classroom. For example, we know that students need a sense of belonging in the academy to be persistent in their studies, but at the classroom level, this looks like a weekly check-in survey to find out how students feel on a given day. Both groups, policymakers and classroom instructors, have important roles to play in moving the needle from injustice to equity. A part of what we all want to do is be the translators of institutional missions and values. We want the same thing, but we do not always describe equity and inclusion with the same language. The policymakers need to support the people in the classroom with resources and information but also with the translation of 10,000 foot ideas into ground-level applications. Policymakers can also explain how the small applications fit into the larger view of systemic approaches to equity and inclusion. It goes the other way too. Classroom instructors can show policymakers the real-life challenges of the students in the classroom. For example, students who are traditionally successful may still benefit from more flexible and transparent approaches to assignments, just as students who may not have experienced the same level of privilege in college preparation. At the end of the day, when we make equity and inclusion-based changes to our classrooms, everybody benefits.

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