Strategies to Promote Inclusive Learning Environments in Health Professions Education: Instructor Reflections From an Evaluation of a Diversity, Equity, and Engagement Course Reflection Tool

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> **TAKE HOME POINT –** In this "How-to", we describe strategies that instructors can use to enhance inclusive teaching practices in a variety of settings, based on the evaluation of a DEI Course Reflection Tool.

INTRODUCTION

Across the health professional schools of Emory University's Woodruff Health Sciences Center, centering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a core value of the educational mission to train diverse cohorts of health professionals (School of Medicine, 2021; School of Nursing, nd; Rollins School of Public Health, 2024c). Engaging students in diverse and inclusive learning environments promotes improved educational outcomes, student health, and the health of those they will serve in their careers (Day & Beard, 2019; Dewsberry et al., 2022; Hammond, 2014). Creating and facilitating such environments requires instructors to intentionally develop a "culture in which all learners feel welcomed, valued, and safe" (Hogan &

Sathy, 2022, p. 10). However, instructors do not always feel prepared to integrate inclusive pedagogy into their teaching (Aqil et al., 2021; Altes et al., 2024).

Therefore, we offer several practical strategies—that can be applied to a variety of educational programs and settings across the health professions—for instructors to consider as they prepare a course or training. These strategies are drawn from the development, pilot implementation, and evaluation of a DEI Course Reflection Tool at the Rollins School of Public Health (RSPH, 2024b). The Tool, which broadly defines DEI to recognize students' intersecting identities (see Table 1), prompts instructors to reflect on how dimensions of DEI are included in their course content,

Table 1. Dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the DEI Course Reflection Tool

There are many dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion that should be considered in our courses including, but not limited to:

Ability	Gender Expression	Nationality
Age	Gender Identity	Parental/Caregiver Roles
Citizenship	Geographic Area	Political Affiliation
Cognitive Ability	Immigration Status	Race
Culture	Language	Religion
Education Level	Learning Preferences	Sexual orientation
Ethnicity	Marital Status	Socioeconomic Status/
Experience	Mental Health	Class
	Military Experience	

materials, and implementation. The evaluation included eight interviews with 12 key informants, analysis of 155 completed Tools (46% of courses from Fall 2022, Spring 2023, Fall 2023), and a brief online instructor survey in Fall 2022 (n=39; 57.4% response rate). A key finding of the evaluation was that instructors desire specific examples of how they can implement inclusive teaching practices and further infuse dimensions of DEI in their courses. Thus, this How-to paper aims to share examples from instructors' reflections on steps they have taken to ensure diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning spaces for their students (see Tables 2 & 3).

COURSE PREPARATION: SETTING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Inclusive teaching starts with designing accessible and equity-minded learning opportunities (Cuenca-Carlino, 2023). Based on the data reviewed, during course preparation, instructors ensured that they included "sections that describe accommodations and attendance policies, reflecting student considerations with health and social justice work" in their syllabi. For assignments, instructors reported that they "allow assignments to be done in multiple formats" and "review the calendar with religious holidays" to ensure they are "not requesting important due dates on or close to these."

Table 2. Example pedagogical strategies to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom drawn from instructors' reflections: Course Preparation

Elements for reflection	Example pedagogical strategies
Course Preparation – Setting the Foundations for Inclusive Learning Environment	
Course policies and norms	• Include sections in syllabus that describe accommodations and attendance policies, reflecting student considerations with health and social justice work
Structure and flexibility	• Be willing to work with students' specific circumstances and give students reasonable accommodations when possible • Consider how assignments can be done in multiple formats
Course content and materials	• Attend to diversity in guest speaker choices, readings, examples, topics of classroom discussions • Update course materials to be non-gender specific • Enhance accessibility through adding closed captioning to recorded lectures • Review course materials to ensure varied representation in illustrations and photos • Assess the cost of course materials and consider making expensive books optional

In choosing course content and materials, instructors should intentionally consider which dimensions of DEI are currently represented and which could be added (see Table 1). Specific examples from instructors include infusing "…the scholarship of authors from historically underrepresented groups in academia, such as women and people of color…," integrating "…topics that try to bring out issues of structural racism more," and paying attention to "diversity in guest speaker choices, readings, examples, [and topics for] classroom discussions." Strategies mentioned by instructors to enhance accessibility include ensuring that captions are added to all recordings and using the accessibility checker feature in the course learning management system (e.g., Canvas).

COURSE IMPLEMENTATION: DEVELOPING AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

At the start of the semester, developing an inclusive classroom community can be facilitated through an initial discussion with the students about class expectations and ground rules for conversations or situations. One instructor reflected,

Table 3. Example pedagogical strategies to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom drawn from instructors' reflections: Course Implementation & Professional Development

Elements for reflection	Example pedagogical strategies
Course Implementation – Developing an Inclusive Classroom Community	
Inclusive class norms	• Hold a discussion at beginning of the course about class "ground rules" • Get to know students, including how to correctly pronounce their names • Periodically review students' performance and proactively reach out to those who seem to be falling behind to see what support may be needed.
Facilitating environment for inclusive discussion	• Give students opportunities to share their views with their peers in the classroom • Design activities on a variety of topics that prompt students to connect material to a broad range of interests
Responding in difficult situations	• Engage students in a discussion about how to best handle difficult conversations and situations that may arise. • Acknowledge the situation. Take a pause if needed and revisit.
Gather student feedback and make adjustments	• Review mid-term course evaluations • Discuss the feedback and feasible changes with students • Review final course evaluations • Integrate feedback when next preparing to teach the course
Professional Development in Inclusive Pedagogy	
Further develop teaching skills	• Read literature on inclusive teaching strategies and other pedagogical approaches • Attend workshops and trainings (e.g., facilitating critical conversations, addressing microaggressions, supporting teamwork) • Review teaching resources • Discuss ideas and challenges with colleagues

"The hope is that by acknowledging that microaggressions and/or tough subjects that may come up, any harm that might come to students may be prevented/ minimized and that we have a plan as a class to best handle the situation to repair any damage caused and maintain a safe space for learning."

Another instructor facilitated "shared classroom power including shared refinement of syllabi."

Getting to know students and engaging them in their learning is a key aspect of inclusive teaching (Hogan & Sathy, 2022). When getting to know students, one instructor noted that they "ask about pronunciation of names and write it phonetically." Another instructor practices "listening more so than asking. Always listening to what students communicate." Regarding activities in class sessions, instructors reported that they "purposively ask students to think about diversity and equity in their classroom discussions and on assignments" and create "space for students to discuss DEI issues." To provide support to students throughout a course, an instructor wrote,

" I aim to advance equity by periodically reviewing each student's performance in my courses and proactively reaching out to those who seem to be falling behind…I gladly work with each student's specific circumstances and give students reasonable accommodations whenever possible."

ENGAGING IN ONGOING PRACTICE OF REFLECTION ON TEACHING

Instructors recognized the importance of ongoing reflection along with professional development and learning. For example, one instructor noted that they intended to learn more about "which language or terms and behaviors are stigmatizing or biased." We encourage instructors to reflect on their teaching and make changes to further infuse aspects of DEI each time they teach. These changes can be sweeping, such as a course redesign, or smaller tweaks that, overtime, lead to substantial changes in facilitating inclusive learning environments. Inclusive teaching skills can be developed through ongoing learning by reading, attending workshops, discussing ideas with colleagues, and using the DEI Course Reflection Tool (see Table 4).

While it is crucial for instructors to continually reflect on and further develop their teaching, we also recognize the necessity of institutional culture shift and support to facilitate sustainment of inclusive pedagogy throughout health professions education. In recognition of institution's role in supporting inclusive teaching, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (2024) released a report with five recommendations to increase inclusive excellence through an anti-racism lens. The recommendations include articulating norms and values, assuring

accountability, increasing commitment and consistency of efforts, and sharing initiatives to accelerate institutionalization of inclusive excellence. Therefore, we encourage programs to offer spaces where instructors can share ideas and schools to offer training and resources that encourage instructors to develop their skills further.

Table 4. Resources to support instructors' professional and personal development in inclusive teaching

Category	Resources
Resources on inclusive teaching	• Emory's Teaching Toolkit (CFDE) • Rollins Teaching and Learning Core (RSPH) • RSPH DEI Course Reflection Tool • Department of Accessibility Services (Emory)
Resources for developing an inclusive syllabus	• Syllabus Resources (CFDE) • Religious Holidays (Emory University Office of Spiritual and Religious Life)
Resources for supporting an inclusive learning environment	• Antiracist Discussion Pedagogy (Chew et al., 2020) • Disarming racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2019)
Resources for development on DEI	• Emory + You Diversity and Inclusion Training

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