

Centering Power to Teach Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Courses in Higher Education and Student Affairs

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Faculty in higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate programs consistently highlight equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as an important value of their programs. NASPA and ACPA define EDI as a core competency required of all student affairs professionals. In this brief, we highlight one strategy for centering power in EDI courses in HESA programs.

Teaching and Learning Context

Similar to many HESA programs, our teaching contexts have included required EDI courses for graduate students, offered in a 15-week semester format. The courses have been offered through in-person, hybrid, and online environments. One common strategy for teaching EDI courses is to focus on an identity-of-the-week. Certainly, ensuring that students have a strong understanding of the ways people experience campus as it relates to one or more minoritized identities is worthy of attention. However, continuing to organize EDI courses around identity often results in unintentionally focusing on the identity, rather than oppression, as the problem to address.

To address this challenge, we took a power-conscious (Linder, 2018) approach to organizing our EDI courses. Specifically, Chris began organizing her EDI courses in 2016 using the Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin (2013) model of individual, institutional, and social/cultural levels of oppression. As a student in one of Chris' courses, TJ later adopted the approach in his teaching his own EDI courses as a faculty member. Chris structured her courses into five distinct units: history and theoretical foundations, individual-level oppression, institutional-level oppression, social/cultural-level oppression, and agency/action. An example course description include:

Course Description: Students will explore concepts of EDI in student affairs. Specifically, students will be exposed to a history of EDI in higher education and core theoretical frameworks related to EDI. Additionally, students will examine the role of power and oppression at individual, institutional, and social/cultural levels, resulting in a deeper understanding of the relationship between the three. Finally, students will consider their roles as student affairs educators to interrupt oppression.

As a result of focusing on power rather than identity as the core, students are exposed to ways of thinking, being, and doing, rather than “knowing.” Specifically, by teaching

concepts of power and oppression, students can more easily pivot to understand and apply concepts learned to a variety of settings, rather than focusing on a checklist of things to “know” to more effectively serve X group of students. For example, toward the end of TJ’s Fall 2021 EDI course, the President of the US decided to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Because TJ centered a power analysis in his course, students in the class were able to engage meaningfully on what power had to do with the issue, and how imperialism connected to equity and justice. In most courses there is likely not room or a place for such a specific topic, and students may not have the language and framing to engage, as the topic does not fit neatly into an “identity/ism of the week” approach. However, by centering power, students engaged in conversations and action about many topics because they understand how power works even if they did not have a “unit” on a particular topic in their course.

Teaching and Learning Opportunities

Using a power-conscious approach also allows an instructor or faculty member to pivot quickly when the time arises. In the summer of 2020, issues of police brutality received widespread, mainstream attention. We were both scheduled to teach an EDI course in the Fall of 2020, which was also still during the pandemic, so the courses would take place virtually. Because our courses were already set up to examine oppression, we could quickly shift the course to focus explicitly and exclusively (or include a unit) on the relationship between racism and policing. Because the course objectives included a focus on power, it was easy to shift the focus. The learning objectives for Chris’s course became:

As a result of this course, students will:

- Examine various theories and frameworks related to the scholarship of equity, diversity, and inclusion in educational settings.
- Examine the historical and current contexts of policing, oppression, and violence in the U.S.
- Examine the connection between racism and trauma.
- Explore and practice strategies for healing from racism and white supremacy.
- Develop an action project to address issues of inequity in their communities.

Key Takeaways

From our respective experiences, we have found that students leave our courses with a more robust understanding through which to engage issues of equity and justice because they have an understanding of power. For example a Fall 2021 course evaluation comment a student noted:

I think the pathway we are taking in the course is helpful. We have been reminded a few times about the various levels of power and each time I feel like everything is connecting for me and it makes it much more impactful. This focus allows us to make more sense as we navigate the weeks but we also are able to reflect on where we have been and how all of these issues are connected.

In addition we find students ask critical questions and make profound probes in subsequent courses including organization and administration, advising and supporting, and even assessment and evaluation. For faculty seeking to establish a value and ethic of equity and justice, this type of course design helps students hold faculty, peers, and their assistantship/job sites accountable to centering an understanding and analysis of power in theory and praxis.

Resources

Below we have included a broad structure for how a course might be organized to incorporate this approach. To be clear, it is not that faculty are unable to focus on specific identity experiences but that they are couched in different ways within the course. For example in one version of this course we assigned the following text:

Ali, A. I. (2014). A threat enfolded: Muslim college students situate their identities amidst portrayals of Muslim violence and terror. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(10), 1243-1261. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2013.820860

Rather than frame the reading in a religion of inter/faith week, we assigned the text during the second unit of campus contexts on the institutional level. Because the class would have previously focused on and understood individual level oppressions, this week could briefly touch on that and then push students to think about what *institutional structures of power* which inform/facilitate the experiences of Muslim students in the study. In this way many topics that one might previously covered could still be included, but power is the center and nuance to how it is discussed within the course.

References

- Hardiman, R., Jackson, B., & Griffin, P. (2013). Conceptual foundations. In M. A. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, C. Castaneda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zúñiga X. (Eds). *Teaching for diversity & social justice* (pp. 26-35). Routledge.
- Linder, C. (2018). *Sexual violence on campus: Power-conscious approaches to awareness, prevention, and response*. Emerald Publishing.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Unit 1: Introductions, Foundations, and Individual Level Oppression <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning Outcomes Assessment and Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Measure	
Week 1 Introductions & Foundations	
Week 2 Individual Level: Socialization	
Week 3 Individual Level: Privilege & Oppression	
Week 4 Theoretical Foundations	
Week 5 Identity, Facilitation, and Difficult Dialogues	
Week 6	

Individual Level: Fragility and Trauma	
<p>Unit 2: Institutional Level Oppression As a result of this module students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning Outcomes <p>Assessment and Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Measure 	
<p>Week 7 Institutional Level: Social Justice, Equity, and Inclusion work in Higher Education & Student Affairs</p>	
<p>Week 8 Institutional Level: Campus Contexts I</p>	
<p>Week 9 Institutional Level: Campus Contexts II</p>	
<p>Week 10 Institutional Level: Local Contexts</p>	

Unit 3: Social/Cultural Levels of Oppression

As a result of this module students will:

- Learning Outcomes

Assessment and Evaluation

- Measure

Week 11

Social/Cultural
Level:
Whiteness and
White
Supremacy

Week 12

Social/Cultural
Level: The
Matrix of
Dominance

Unit 4: Agency and Action

As a result of this module students will:

- Learning Outcomes

Assessment and Evaluation

- Measure

Week 13

Agency and
Action:
Activism

Week 14

Agency and
Action: Self &

Community Care	
Week 15 Special Topics, Presentations, Facilitations	