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Preparing Graduate Students for a DEI-Framed Basic Course: A Graduate Student Perspective

Adam E. Tristan

University of Kentucky, adam.tristan@uky.edu

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Preparing Graduate Students for a DEI-Framed Basic Course: A Graduate Student Perspective

Cover Page Footnote

Adam Tristan is a PhD Candidate at the University of Kentucky and a United in True Racial Equity Predoctoral Fellow.

Basic Course Forum

Preparing Graduate Students for a DEI-Framed Basic Course: A Graduate Student Perspective

Adam E. Tristan, University of Kentucky

Throughout my education and professional experience, I have faced experiences where educators failed to impart the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Often, I found that it was treated superficially rather than being woven into the fabric of the curriculum, and the basic course is no exception. Graduate students are highly influential when learning how to teach for the first time. From a graduate student's perspective, I argue that directors and administrators can demonstrate their commitment to DEI by preparing graduate students in three important ways: (1) transition course materials to the Universal Design for Learning model; and (2) conduct workshops on implicit bias, positionality, and (3) *difficult* discussions.

Graduate teaching assistants carry a significant portion of the teaching load for the basic course and may need to gain the knowledge or skill to integrate DEI fully. In addition, teaching is a new experience for many graduate students, and some struggle to adapt to the diverse population of learners in their classrooms. For example, in the graduate office, peers have asked how to accommodate a student with a disability, yet these are considered isolated issues that need to be addressed on an as-needed basis. From a DEI perspective, however, the basic course design should be accessible to all students, not just the abled.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides equitable guidelines "to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning

opportunities" (CAST, 2018). Simple things like accompanying digital media with a transcript and closed captioning can benefit students who are hard-of-hearing or still learning English (Boothe et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015). Some universities offer graduate students PowerPoints, syllabi, media, and learning management templates to work from. The provision and standardization of these materials provide an opportunity to integrate UDL guidelines across all sections of the basic course. If these materials follow UDL guidelines, in most cases, graduate students do not have to search for ways to meet the needs of their students. Giving graduate students materials, methods, and assessments around UDL would model the behaviors that we preach. In turn, graduate students would adopt DEI pedagogical practices without knowing any difference. Of course, any training conducted for graduate students should start with the importance of UDL and DEI while understanding why those strategies are needed for an inclusive classroom. Therefore, directors and administrators must be trained and knowledgeable about the principles and guidelines of UDL for course design. It would be prudent to note the framework of UDL is only one among many other ways to incorporate accessibility in the classroom. Although the design may begin with the course directors, graduate students must also be prepared for day-to-day experiences in the classroom.

Moreover, many graduate students who are admitted into graduate school come from places of privilege and may not fully understand their privilege (Mosely, 2018). As a starting point, I recommend that graduate students undergo unconscious bias training and a reflexive workshop to understand their positionality (see Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Ropp, 2021). These workshops can inform and help graduate students acknowledge their limited experiences and viewpoints that may differ from the student population. It also encourages graduate students to recognize and reflect on their own privilege and biases. Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) argue that “without such reflection, instructors’ potential experiences of dominant social positions and privileged identities can unwittingly silence or shame students’ views and experiences that differ from their own” (p. 139). Therefore, these workshops allow graduate students to better understand their social identity and its influence on how they lead the classroom.

In that same vein, graduate students must have training in how to facilitate inclusive discussions that are productive and allows for diverse opinions. Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) offer ten best practices for facilitating “difficult” discussions and how to integrate them into the basic course. From setting ground rules for discussion to face-saving strategies when something offense is said, Ruiz-Mesa and

Hunter present an effective place to begin, for novice and tenured instructors alike. Just like teaching, facilitating discussion is a learned skill that is sharpened through practice, but learning effective strategies is the first step. If graduate students are not equipped with practical strategies to navigate those discussions, they are left to their experiences. Thus, leaving graduate students uncomfortable in discussing and presenting “difficult” topics meaningfully.

Graduate students are future faculty, and we should treat them as such. Setting them up with the mindset of diversity, equity, and inclusion will hopefully help them thrive in a DEI-framed course and ultimately lead to institutional change as they move up the ranks of academia.

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